スレイヤーズ

14 セレンティアの憎悪

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SLAYERS:

HATRED IN SELLENTIA

ONE: A Power Struggle in the Human World, With No End to its Cause.

“When the sun sets, demons wil appear–” I said. As if I was singing. The light was stained orange, and

the night tainted black, mixing in the townscape we looked upon. “I heard a story like that somewhere

before. Certainly, in the orange-stained world, hiding between the light and dark, somewhere where the

eyes can’t see, demons are hiding– creeping through the gaps in my heart, slowly driving me mad. That’s

the kind of feeling I get.”

“So in other words…” my traveling companion, Gourry, said, looking out at the same scene. He was a

handsome, unmistakeably ultra-first class, swordsman. Regrettably, instead of brains, his head was

stuffed with soggy pasta. His long blond hair, with the wind and the sunset, glowed like a wavering flame.

“We lost the road because of the dusk, but aren’t you kind of at fault for spontaneously going through the

back al eys?”

“. . . . . .”

“. . . . . .”

It was silent. The only sound was the moaning of the wind.

“Daaahhhh! It’s my fault! Everything is al my fault!” I couldn’t help it. I had honestly made a mistake.

In the territory of the Ralteague Empire, Sellentia City, also known as the city of temples. On the

prosperous ground of the Flare Dragon Ceiphied faith, there are five large temples. I’ve heard it told that

among the devout, there are those who come here solely to make a pilgrimage. The two of us, while

wandering aimlessly in our travels, happened to be in the area, and for some reason or another decided

to stop by. When we came to this city the sun was stil high in the sky…

“But Gourry!” I raised my index finger while talking to him. “spontaneously’ isn’t the appropriate word for it!

My heart is stimulated by my appreciation for good taste, and when I’m in a downtown area devoid of

entertainment, in order to fully enjoy the simple and quiet atmosphere, my body surrenders itself to my

feet!”

“Uhhh…” Gourry thought for a bit. “Didn’t you say ‘we should go there for some reason or another’? Isn’t

that spontaneous?”

–gh! Crap! For the battle-hardened genius sorceress, the great Lina Inverse, my special move against

normal people is my ‘Purposeful y Speak in Roundabout Ways to Cause Confusion Attack” but when I’m

against Gourry’s simple brain, it won’t work!

“K–! You did it Gourry!”

“…what’s that?” He said to me nonchalantly, without knowing my innermost strategy. I flipped my cape.

“Phew. Right here, I will quietly admit my defeat. …I know. If I use a levitation spel , I can see where the

road goes from the sky.” I began chanting a spel in my mouth. But I was suddenly interrupted.

“Lina.”

“I know.” I answered Gourry. There, from out in the street it flowed on the breeze. A sound like hard

objects clashing– in other words, weapons. Someone was fighting. Of course I didn’t plan on sticking my

neck into it.

“For now it’s be best if we got away from here, okay?”

“yeah…”

we nodded to each other, then turned so that the sound was at our backs.

“It stopped.” Gourry murmured again. The sounds of weapons had disappeared. So then, the fight was

over? Or so I thought.

KABOOM!!

Instantly the wall of a nearby home was blown apart! Wha–?! Debris fluttered around in a cloud of dust.

The two of us jumped back and somehow avoided being hit with any shrapnel. Was that– an attack spell?!

Within the cloud of dust bathed in the orange of sunset– there was a presence.

“Who was that?! Was it you bastards?!” From there I heard a man’s voice. Slowly and quietly, two

shadows emerged from within the dust. The first one carried a long sword in one hand; a warrior clad in

light mail. And the other one– His entire body was completely wrapped in black clothes. Even his face,

except for the portion where his eyes were, was concealed by black cloth. –Typical Assassin style. In his

hand was a large dagger. Were these the two that were fighting? The voice had come from the one that

looked like a warrior.

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“A sorceress and a warrior… who are you working for?!” The warrior questioned us a second time. Wait…

did he say… working for?

“We were just passing by.”

“. . . . . .”

In response to my honesty, the warrior was silent for a while.

“I see… You’re not stupid enough to tel the truth. In which case…” He said as if he understood.

No, I was tel ing the truth… looks like it’s useless trying to talk to them… The assassin was standing there

silently. And suddenly without even a blur of motion, he kicked the earth and made a big jump! But it

wasn’t toward us, it was backwards. Since he assumed the two of us were enemies, either he didn’t like

three way fights, or in an unrelated decision he chose to retreat because we weren’t worth causing an

uproar over. I just didn’t know which one it was.

The assassin type took cover in his new position, and immediately his presence vanished.

“…hm…” The warrior type sneered in the direction of where the assassin had disappeared from. “Looks

like he realized he was no match for me and ran away… as for

the rest of you…”

Eek! He glared right at us.

“You bastards!”

Hey now…

“I don’t know who hired you, but listen here! If you get out of town right now, I’ll overlook what happened

here! Got that?!!”

“Wh… But… Isn’t this al just a misunderstanding?” Gourry said as he itched at his cheek. The man raised

an eyebrow.

“Misunderstanding? I get it… since it’s two against one, you have the advantage! You have no reason to

say something like that! Unlesssss…!”

“Dug Wave.”

BOOM!

“Aieeeee!!”

With just one spell, I blasted him away. Ugh, that was irritating.

“Hey, Gourry… For that kind of opponent, you don’t need to act decently. It’s just a waste of time.”

“No… that’s not… Anyway, what was that just now?”

In response to his question I answered, “Wel … I real y don’t know… But I can say one thing for sure–

Somehow, once again, something troublesome is giving us a warm welcome."

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"…Is that so? …So that's what I saw…" the elderly Chief Counselor said with a sigh, after listening to my

story. He didn't seem shocked at all.

The next day at dawn we had come to the Sel entia City Sorcerer's Guild. Stopping by at the guild, we

greeted the Chief Counselor and told him about the fight we witnessed yesterday– and that was the

response he gave us.

"Y-you knew?!" At my question, the white haired, white bearded Chief Counselor nodded with a bitter

expression.

"You do know that this city is known as the city of temples right?"

"Yes… I've heard that…"

"So then, did you hear about the fire that burned down the center temple two months ago?"

"…This is the first I've heard of that."

"Wel … that was when it al started…" The chief counselor began his long-winded tale…

Here in Sellentia city there are many temples, but there is

primarily only one temple divided into parts. At

the center of the city is the main temple, where Flare Dragon Ceiphied is enshrined. Then in the east,

west, south, and north, there are four branches of the main temple where the four Dragon Lords are

enshrined. Through the generations, the head priest governs the main temple as well as the four

branches, and the four high priests which he selects are entrusted with partial management of the four

branches. And that's how things were structured. However…

Now it's been about two months. No one knows the cause of the fire that burned down the main temple.

The head priest, as wel as several priests who were inside the temple, didn't make it out. After that, it was just like the incident promised. In other words, a succession struggle for the position of head priest.

Head Priest is equal to Holy Monarch, and it's stupid to think only a good-natured person would want that.

What that means is if the priest is human, he will have worldly desires. Because this is called the city of

temples, he who holds the position of head priest has control over the temples, and the city as well. And

that's no exaggeration. Natural y, the high priests disagreed and disagreed. You can't say they had a

good relationship to begin with, but they no longer had anyone to restrain their powers. And yet, the status

of head priest is dangling in front of their eyes. It's not that there's no reason for them to disagree.

When they first met to discuss it, it just turned into boasting and slander, then continued with accusing

each other of starting the fire, and then it ended in a quarrel. Since there weren't any witnesses, if the

head priest's old friend– the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild– hadn't happened to have been

there, it might have turned into a battle royale where the winner got to advance to the next level. If by any

chance it had been settled with a fistfight, there might have been peace afterward. But by not reaching a

conclusion to the discussion, all that was left was animosity.

Shortly after, thugs and mercenaries were hired and sent to harass the other branches of the temple, and

the dispute expanded until things were beyond repair. So the people we saw yesterday were involved in

this conflict.

"Mmm… that sure turned sour…"

"As long as you didn't hear me say it." The Chief Counselor made a bitter face at my honest impression.

“But then… Aren’t they al clergymen? The ones we saw yesterday looked like genuine assassins. Isn’t

that overkill?”

“I thought so too… but… The problem is that they don’t think so. The cause of the fire in the main temple

stil isn’t clear. Which makes it the only major problem. There are those who think if someone real y

wanted the position, they would start a fire and see that the head priest burned to death, wouldn’t they?

And once they believe that, they also think that it wouldn’t be that mysterious if whoever did it, would aim

for them next. Then they all get worked up thinking they need to defeat the other opponents before they

get kil ed by miscreants themselves. And that’s how things have been.”

“I see…”

Someone hired some thugs and that’s where things real y started. An eye for an eye. Someone hired

thugs to oppose the thugs that had been sent after him, of course the thugs he hired would have to be

more skilled than the others. That kind of power game escalated until it turns into things like yesterday’s

showdown between the warrior and the assassin.

“Anyway, Miss Lina Inverse…”

“No.” I interrupted him with a big smile.

“. . . . . .” The Chief Counselor was silent for a while. “I stil haven’t told you everything…”

“Yes, but while pouring out your story, you’ve already cal ed me by my ful name. No matter what you

think, that makes me feel like you’re about to request something complicated.” At that the Chief Counselor

grinned.

“We are always hearing about your exploits…”

Heehee… Here comes my strategy where I don’t listen to my opponent’s side…

“I said ‘no’ ♥”

“Somehow I’ve been managing things and making preparations here and there… In summary, ten days

from now there will be another meeting where the four high priests will gather and decide who should

become the next head priest. Then everything wil be settled.”

“But I said ‘no.”

“But probably within those 10 days, many people should be trying to start things. That’s the only thing

that’s needs to be somehow prevented.”

“Hahahaha. But I just said ‘no,’ didn’t I?”

“I strongly believe that you can do something about this.”

“Wel , I real y need to be going so–”

“I’m begging you! You have to do somethi i ing!”

“Dwaaaahhh! Get off of me!!”

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“–And that’s how it is. We’ve got work to do, Gourry.”

“…huh?”

This was after we had left the Sorcerer’s Guild, in the dining hal of the inn we were staying at. I made my

announcement, using a light tone whenever possible, but Gourry only frowned at me.

“Hey… didn’t you say while we were here we were just gonna take it easy and not do any work?”

“I didn’t.” I answered him clearly and readily. Actually. I feel like I did say something like that yesterday

afternoon. But in this situation, we have to go with the changing of the times.

Damn… I real y don’t want to do this kind of work. It’d be nice if I could just say ‘Someone from the

Sorcerer’s Guild is watching your actions, so it’d be best if you didn’t do anything rash.’ Then silently

pressure them. But that’s optimistic. Very Optimistic. Before they hired assassins, before they got each

other worked up, then they probably would’ve said something like ‘oh wel , there’s nothing we can do

about it’ but now there’s no reason for them to be tame. In the

worst case, in the eyes of their allies, we

would be considered an impediment to their justice, reflecting as fear. In other words, we'd be getting into

something dangerous.

But… The old man, who should've known better than to cling to me crying like that, still clung to me with

his tears flowing. I told him it would be fifty– no, 100 gold coins if he wanted it to be completely settled. As one would expect, he couldn't refuse. Because up until this dispute, the temple had been backing the

Sorcerer's Guild– or so some people think. But really this sort of thing is only natural.

You can discuss it to the end, but the guild and the temple are secretly closely connected. Secretly is just

a way of saying that it's not good to talk about it. In short, the Sorcerer's Guild has the knowledge to

develop healing spel s, and they sel that to the temple. There just hasn't been an official announcement

of that. In comparison to the Sorcerer's Guild, the temple, with it's lack of organization, doesn't have the

power to develop healing spells on its own. But– they have to.

Those called humans are meant to be practical. Rather than tel the truth that religion won't cause

miracles, even if it's completely false, they'l say what's most convenient for them. So they have a

tendency to fal into a religion where what's convenient for them is causing miracles. To say it without

being too blunt, take admirable ideals for example. Even if you have high ideals, if no one in your religion

can perform a healing spell, you won't garner many clients– I mean, followers. And then of course, you

wouldn't be an organization.

At the end of the day, al sorts of sorcery techniques can be bought from the Sorcerer's Guild: things like

healing, detoxification, and purification, then passed off as 'Works of God' to those who come to the

temple from other cities. The priests can receive personal instruction from the sorcerer's Guild and learn

many spel s. To put it short, for the Sorcerer's Guild, the temple is their best customer– and a large part of their income. Especial y in this city where tourism from the temple is a large part of the city's income. So

the Sorcerer's Guild receives a considerable amount of revenue from the temple. This is al simply

because of their relationship. Because the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild got along so wel with

the head priest, the fighting that's occurring between the temple

branches, probably makes his heart

ache.

At any rate… We had lunch at the inn, then fol owed the road to the north end of the city. I roughly

explained the gist of the situation to Gourry.

“I see… There’s something bad going on in this city too…” he said in a carefree tone.

“Look Gourry… you say that like it’s not our problem. We’re also involved in the bad things that are going

on.”

“We’re involved… Wel , I can say it like it’s not my problem because you’re the one who took the

commission.”

“…gh! You can’t say that to a female partner!”

“Uh, you being female isn’t the problem… Wait, Lina, over there…”

“Huh?” I followed Gourry’s gaze. White stone houses, stal s lining the main street, children running

around. In the middle of this ordinary scene, there was one thing that was different. A giant, burned

cathedral. It was made of stone. The original shape was still there, but from the inferno was a steeple

covered in black soot and holes where you could peek through

to see the surrounding houses.

"That's… the main branch where the fire was."

"Are we gonna go look?"

"We'l do that later. We should have plenty of time to stop by. More than that, I want to meet with the four

high priests. I want to somehow meet al of them face to face today."

"Oh!" At that Gourry clapped his hands together. "So this means we're going to see one of them!"

Swoop. My foot slipped and I almost fell over.

"Wh-What the hel did you think we walked here for?!"

"Uh… post-meal exercise? Sightseeing?"

"No… wel , it doesn't matter but… Anyway, we're heading for the Water Temple in the north end of the

city. It's where Aqualord Ragradia is enshrined. The one in charge there is the high priest Kereth. And if

we turn this way, next is–"

"Hold on!" Suddenly Gourry made me stop.

"What? Why so sudden?"

"Lina, right now you were about to describe the next person we'd meet at the next place we'd go, and then

the next, and the next, right?"

“Yeah… why…?”

“Phew! That’s great!” Gourry said triumphantly. “If you describe all four of them at once, I’l have an

excuse not to remember them!”

“Don’t be proud of that! …uh, wel , I guess that’s kind of true… So then if I explain each person

individual y from place to place, you would kind of remember their names?”

“. . . . . .”

“. . . . . hey . . . . .”

“. . . . . In this world, many things are impossible.”

“Don’t say that so proud!”

Smack!

I jumped and chopped Gourry in the back of the head.

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We final y arrived a while later. This city is pretty big… Anyway, there we stood inside a magnificent

temple. Because it was a shrine to Aqualord, the building’s theme was a refined, blue design on a fairly

wide plot of land. Only– most likely because of the fighting, the garden needed tending to and a number of

street thugs had gathered around the foyer.

Mmm… this is gonna be rough… But this story can't start unless I meet with the high priest, Kereth.

"Is the high priest here?!" I yel ed, standing in front of the group of thugs.

"Huh? What's that?" Probably the leader. He was sitting with his back to me and as he spoke, he stood up

with a little sway. He turned and looked at– Hey!

"What do you want with– Wh- Hey!" My opponent cried out as he turned his eyes toward me. We both

sized each other up.

"Ah! One of these thugs… is that you, Luke? What are you doing in a place like this?!"

"Same goes for you! W-Wait a second! Why did you have to say that sounding so completely disgusted?!"

He scowled at me.

A tall man with black hair, light mail, and a somewhat evil look in his eyes. It was none other than the self-

proclaimed treasure hunter, occasional idiot, and sorcerer-swordsman, Luke. Several times we had ended

up involved in the same issues, and just a little while ago, in a certain incident, we formed a united

front. When that incident was over, we set off traveling down different paths– or we should have. Well,

looks like we've encountered each other.

"I figured you were dead." I declared, without hesitating. Now that you mention it, he's always with

someone– but, when I looked around Luke, I couldn't see his accomplice, Milina.

"Hm? Where's Mil ina? Did she lose interest in you and run away?"

"Bu–! Why would you say that?! The bonds of love and trust between Milina and I are stronger than the

rope you would use to climb mountains with!"

"A relationship of mutual trust is pretty broad, don't you think?"

"Shut up! We both took the same guard job! Milina's just guarding inside!"

"Hm… so in other words, she was too disgusted with you to work in the same location?"

"Noooo!! M-More than that! What do you want, final y?"

"Ah, right, right. This isn't the time to be teasing you as much as I please."

"Don't come here just to do that!!"

"Like I said before, the high priest here– Kereth Rolencio. I came to meet with him." Disregarding his

objections, I got straight to business.

“Oh…” This man, in relation to Milina, went beyond being a fool to the point where he was almost limp.

Despite looking this way, he had considerable skill.

“…For now, I’m the perimeter escort, by that, I want to ask you something. What do you want? –No, who

are you al ied with?”

“My role is a mediator for the Sorcerer’s Guild.” I answered, unwavering.

“Hm…” Luke was silent for a moment. “All right. I believe you. If you had been lying, your friend should’ve

made a strange face off to the side.”

“Hold on! Is Gourry supposed to be my personal lie detector?!”

“Something like that. Anyway, I understand what you’re saying.” He spoke with his back to me as we

walked. I kind of don’t understand what’s going on, but I can’t help how meaningless it is. My initial

objective is to meet the high priest. As we approached the entrance, the guys– who I really couldn’t tel if

they were mercenaries or street thugs– cleared out of the way, and Gourry and I were able to enter.

“This way.” Luke led the way down a large corridor. For a tourist attraction, compared to what I’d heard, I

couldn’t see any tourists– er, worshipers. Well, with one

situation on top of another, and all sorts of ill-bred people coming in and out of here, there's no reason any worshipers would want to stay. Of course, there

were priests. They were just outnumbered by these guys who were either thugs or mercenaries. Naturally,

I couldn't see the assassin-looking guy around anywhere. Eventually–

"We're here." Luke stopped in front of a single room, then knocked on the door. "It's Luke. You have

guests."

"…guests?" another young man's voice came from beyond the door.

"Messengers from the Sorcerer's Guild– so they say."

"…you may come in."

Luke opened the door into a room that wasn't very big. Inside there was one face I recognized and three I

didn't. The one I did recognize was a tall beauty wearing a leather shoulder guard with platinum blond

hair– Luke's traveling companion, Milina. When she saw Gourry and I, her eyebrows moved a little, but

that was her only reaction. Two of them were mercenaries, male and female. And the last person was a

man sitting behind a desk with documents spread out across the

top. He was a man with black hair in his

mid twenties. He was very handsome, but gentle– that is, he seemed weak. He was wrapped in priests'

garments, meaning this man was one of the high priests in question.

"From the Sorcerer's Guild?" As he rose from his seat, he spoke in a reserved tone– that is, he sounded

repulsed. "I am… the one responsible here. I am cal ed Kereth Rolencio…"

"I was selected by the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild and received the position of municipal

guard. My name is Lina Inverse. This is my traveling companion– you can cal him Gourry."

"Municipal… guard?"

"Yes." I grinned. "Because recently al sorts of dangerous things have been going on in this city. I'm

looking out for a foolishly impatient group of col eagues who act like they aren't guilty of anything." Of

course that last line was only there as a blatant insinuation.

"That is quite so! Lately it has been very dangerous! Very Dangerous!" Either he was kind of slow or he

didn't realize it at al . After what I had said, Kereth kept nodding over and over. "Ever since the fire the

atmosphere has been so strained… harassing each other or hurting each other. And then for me,

someone hired people to come here and I've been so scared, so scared. In the end, it got to the point

where I had to hire my own bodyguards just to sleep peaceful y. The expense isn't too unreasonable." He

started chattering on, all in one breath.

"Hey… uh…"

"Our dearly-departed Head Priest entrusted me to this temple, but look! We can't enshrine the great

Aqualord here. Well, that said, according to the folklore, Aqualord was destroyed one thousand years ago

in the Kataart mountains when the Dark Lord was resurrected. But of course, that's only a legend, a

superstition. I believe that the great Aqualord is still in good health somewhere and is protecting over us

al . There are those who don't think that… but knowing that there are so many like that troubles me…

"Hey…"

"Wel , to put it simply, in relation to the other temple branches, this isn't the only one that is unpopular right now. Sorry to trouble you with such a common story but– how do I say this? –compared to the other

places, the offerings here are a bit smal … That's for certain. When the main temple was here, it managed

the surrounding temples, and that was so there wouldn't be any discomfort. Without the main temple,

we've all had to somehow get by on our own, of course that's plain to see, isn't it? And then the

bodyguards compensation–"

"I forgot everything he just said." With High Priest Kereth's story dragging on and on, Luke whispered as

he was standing next to me. "This guy's signature move is persistent complaining… I was going to tel you

that from the start… but now it's too late. Do you understand now why I separated myself from Milina?"

くちくちくちくち
あーでもない こーでもない
でもって
そのうんかんかんかん
やっぱりたらたらがくがく

You could have said that from the beginning. While listening to the high priest run his mouth, I was cursing

Luke from the bottom of my heart.

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Evening approached the city.

“–And now the sun’s going doooowwwnn!”

“It’s because that guy’s story was so long…” walking beside me, Gourry’s voice sounded tired.

Damn it, I was planning to go around to all four branches today. How is that we left around noon and only

spoke to one person?! Of course at this hour it would be impossible to get around to all of the other

branches. Listening to all of that complaining made me tired, so for today we would return to the inn.

There’s no choice but to go to the other branches tomorrow.

“Daaaaahhhh! This is aaaal l ll ll l that guy’s fault!”

“If that’s how you feel, why didn’t you interrupt him?” I only waved my finger with a tsk-tsk at Gourry’s

foolish question.

“It’s obvious. Whether it’s through grumbling or gossip, the key to solving the incident wil be mixed in.”

“Hm.. So that’s how it is… If you say that, then is this like a mystery case? Four people are fighting and

we’re just going to sit back and let them talk? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Nfufufu… certainly it is. Okay? Originally, the cause of al this was the fire that burned down the main

temple and killed the head priest. The situation got chaotic because the origin of the fire wasn’t clear. It’s not that someone started a fire, but that there was a rumor that someone started the fire. And for those

four, once they suspected something, everything else looked suspicious. And that’s what lead to the

fighting. In the end, why was the fire started? Was it an accident or was it arson? And if it was arson. Who

did it? And if that became clear, their suspicions would be cleared.”

“I see. You couldn’t find any clues in the area so you thought you’d just hear him out.”

“That’s how it was.”

“So, any clues?”

“In the end, there weren’t any. And that’s why I’m mad.”

“…I see…”

We spoke as we were walking down the main street. The

burned remains of the main temple came into

view.

Hm…

“Gourry, for now, let’s stop by the wreckage for a bit.”

“Uh… it doesn’t real y matter to me but…”

Even though the road back to the inn was only a little farther, the two of us started heading toward the

temple. But we didn’t worry about getting lost. Because this was a tourist attraction, if we just followed the main street we wouldn’t have to even think about where we were going.

The site was excessively large. There was a fountain with garden trees, and benches.

And then– a giant burned temple. In front of it, there were several flowers left as an offering. In front of the building were two soldiers guarding the entrance, as if they didn’t want anyone with mischievous

objectives coming in. From their faces, they didn’t seem too enthusiastic.

Hm… I wonder if they’l let us in…?

Of course if I used a flight spell, I could just go in through a blown out window. But in that case, if anyone questioned it, I’d be labeled as a suspicious intruder. And I stil haven’t decided whether or not there

would be any clues inside…

“Lina, it’s okay for us to go in.” Gourry’s voice…

“Wha–?!” Immediately I looked up. Before I could notice, Gourry was already smiling at me from beside

the soldiers.

“H-Hold on!”

As I was running over one of the soldiers said, “Wel then, I’l lead you inside.” He said it in such a friendly voice.

“Uh… um, wel … then, could we see the head priest’s room?”

“Sure. This way, please.”

We entered the building before us.

“Hold on, Gourry. What did you tel him?” fal ing a few steps behind the soldier, I whispered to him.

“What did I… I just told them we were officials from the Sorcerer’s Guild and we wanted to look inside.”

…you just said it so easily like that…? Is it real y okay to do it that way? Because that’s a real y

irresponsible method of investigation…

“How’s the investigation going?” I asked the soldier to his back as we were ascending the stairs.

“It was most likely an accidental fire.” he gave me a wry smile over his shoulder. “There have been some

disturbing rumors pouring out. Well, society loves rumors."

After ascending the stairs, we crossed a corridor and climbed another set of stairs. The white walls were

burned and stained with soot. Dirt and carbide covered the floor and stuck to the carpet.

"Because of the head priest's preferences, they used candles instead of magic light. They also burned

incense. Either of those could have spread to the tapestries and caused the fire. –Here's the head priest's

room." The soldier stopped. The room was more compact than I thought it would be. The windows were

blown out and you could see the sky. Of course, there wasn't any furniture and the only thing on the bare

floor was a thin layer of ash. Because of the heat the walls were peeling, and over the layer of soot was a

number of footprints, probably from those who entered during a previous investigation. Hmmmmmm….

"There's nothing left to use as a reference, huh? Is there anywhere else you'd like to see?"

"Hey, right now, is there anyone else in the building besides us?" After being silent until now, Gourry

asked suddenly.

"No. There shouldn't be anyone here besides us…"

“Lina.” Gourry passed me a serious look. “I’m not sure when it started… but I’ve had a feeling like

someone’s been watching us.”

“…!”

I hadn’t felt a presence. But, Gourry’s senses were, plainly said, in a completely different league. He went

past human limits by a wide margin.

“It’s just your imagination. Wel , we are at the site of where someone was burned to death. You’re not

going to get very good feelings.” Our guide said in a carefree tone. However. Between what the carefree

guard was saying and Gourry’s wild instincts, I believed in Gourry.

“Do you know where?”

“Sort of.”

“Let’s go.”

With a brief conversation Gourry fled from the room, with me only one step behind him.

“Ah! Wait!” We ignored the guard’s voice. We ran down the stairs and then through the hal .

“It moved!” Gourry said, changing course. We proceeded down a long hal where there used to be

something on the ceiling, probably stained glass. But now there

were only broken pieces, stained orange

from the light of the sun, which continued to illuminate the floor and remains of the walls. And then–

“Here!” All at once, Gourry jumped across the room. I followed one step behind him. There was just an

empty room. There weren’t any doors besides the one we came through, and if you count it as furniture,

the only thing there was a burnt chandelier swaying from the ceiling. There wasn’t anything else. No one

was there.

“It disappeared…?” Gourry whispered, his words fal ing out.

“You had me worried! Running al over the place on your own… Look! There’s no one here, okay?!” The

guard finally caught up with us. As I listened to him from behind me, a strange premonition gripped my

chest.

***

“I know one of those guys did it!” His self introduction went on and on. The high priest of the Flare Lord

Vrabazard temple, Francis Dimitrio, spoke in an irritated voice.

Because we lost a whole day to High Priest Kereth’s complaints yesterday, this morning, Gourry and I

headed to the temple branch in the east end of the city. Of course, hanging around the temple were a

bunch of guys who could have either been guards or street thugs. But the one we needed to get

introduced to…

High Priest Francis' voice boomed. He was probably around forty, with blond hair that was cut short. He

was a sturdy old man with wine-red robes.

"It's sincerely regrettable what happened to the Head Priest, Lord Joshua. He did everything in fairness

and had such compassion. God would not have summoned an accidental death for him! In this case, don't

you think this must have been done by someone with evil enough intentions to do it by their own hand or

by way of assassin?!" Somehow this is a really theoretical view he's elaborating on. "Wel , at any rate…

after about ten days, we're supposed to decide on a new head priest. I don't think I've said anything about

it, but until then, there are going to be some rash actions. Please be careful."

"Did you say rash?!" At that high priest Francis raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you think pretending not to know that our great head

priest was murdered and carelessly holding a

discussion over who should be the new head priest is quite rash?! …The reason the chief counselor of the

guild sent help is to save face for agreeing on this discussion but… If the sinner who murdered him is

among the high priests, I wil never al ow it! Not to mention…! If things took a turn for the worse and that

man were to become the head priest, I most definitely would not allow it! I would use any method to stop

it!”

“So you’re saying, if it doesn’t result in you becoming the head priest?”

“That doesn’t matter!” Francis answered my question distinctly, without any hesitation.

Waaahhhh! This is no good! Sometimes it seems like priests and shrine maidens are the type to rush into

things with their lives at stake for the sake of smiting evil. I’ve traveled with someone exactly like that

before. The only distinctive difference between Francis and my old traveling companion, is that this old

man nowhere near as much charm. Wel … if this old man was overflowing with charm, it would be more

weird than anything.

“…hahh…” I let out a little sigh. “I admire you’re resolve. But. If this was a murder, one of the other three

high priests is the culprit. Conversely, that means two of them haven’t done anything. Remember that.

Wel then, we’l be excusing ourselves.”

“Yes. –And somehow, before this meeting takes place, I’d like the sinner to be revealed. …before things

get any worse.”

Of course, that only means, if we can’t do it in time, his resolve will be greater. He was only declaring that.

***

“This is real y bothering me..” We were heading down the road to the next temple on the west side of the

city– The shrine of Airlord. I spoke in a gloomy tone.

“Just now, Francis told us he felt like there was going to be some trouble…”

“But from the beginning, there’s the chance that there isn’t a culprit. The fire might just be an accident.”

Gourry said. But I just shook my head and lowered my voice.

“That’s not how it is. The officials are saying it’s accidental but… there’s no mistake. It was an assassin.”

“Real y?!”

“Yesterday we saw the head priest’s room. In the hal ways on

the way there, the carpets and tapestries

were carbonized. But only the head priest's room had large amounts of ash in it. On top of that, it looked

like the walls were peeling. In other words, only in that room was the temperature hot enough to melt the

walls and turn everything to ash. It would be a different story if there had been oil or firewood in there, but this was not an ordinary fire. Probably… they used an attack spel to roast the head priest alive, then

started fires around the building to make it look like an ordinary fire."

"So then it real y was one of the high priests…?"

"I don't know that much but…"

"Miss Lina and Mr. Gourry, was it?"

Suddenly. I heard a voice that I remembered from one side. When I turned that way I saw Luke and

Milina, accompanying High Priest Kereth!

Ga–! This is bad! If he uses his Complain Attack here–!

"Wel –"

"It's okay, I heard from Mr. Luke and Miss Milina afterward. They were acquaintances of yours from

before. Ah, but fate is very strange isn't it? Meeting like this both today and yesterday." Before I could

speak, once again he started going on and on! Damn! We're real y in troubbl l le!

"You see, every morning I leave flowers as an offering at the main temple, and just now we were on our

way back. Mr. Luke and Miss Milina are here because with al of the danger going on, it's better to refrain

from carelessly going out walking. When our great head priest was alive, he was so helpful and leaving

flowers is the least I can do for him, I think. Well this way we could accompany the two of you. Would that

not give you peace of mind?"

"Is it okay for a high priest to travel through the center of the town? How enthusiastic of you."

The one who stopped Kereth from talking wasn't me. Standing in the street a little way off, was a group of

about ten thugs. They were probably hired by someone. All right! Way to go, street thugs! You really shut

him up! As a reward, I'l go easy on you and defeat you quickly. They walked toward us in such a way that

it seemed like they were announcing 'we're powerful and we're about to be unreasonably mean!'

"Wel , Aqualord must not have a very popular shrine, or else you wouldn't be able to go out doing things

like this, huh?”

“Wel , honestly if it were in the middle of town, it’d be a pretty annoying eyesore. Kind of like how we must

be to these innocent bystanders.”

“Who the hel are you calling innocent bystanders? And just by being there your faces are an annoying

eyesore.”

?!

After I gave my very honest opinion, the air around us froze.

“Ahhhh! Miss Lina, why would you say something like that?!”

I ignored the high priest’s words.

“H-Hey… girl, what the hel did you just say?!”

When one of the little punks threatened me, I purposeful y replied in my weakest sounding voice. “N-No…

I didn’t say anything… it’s just… I was thinking that al of your breathing was pol uting the air…”

“Y-You bitch!”

“That al you have to say?!”

“Don’t you make light of us!”

All at once they started sounding off and coming toward us. Er… wel , I real y was making light of them…

“Dimil ua Wing!”

TZOBODOOOM!

“Bwaaahhh!?”

“I’m a little late on the introduction but…” I said looking down at the convulsing men scattered across the

stone pavement. “I was commissioned by the Sorcerer’s Guild to be a municipal guard. In this case,

because al sorts of dangerous people were acting out, so I made sure there weren’t any disturbances.”

“Y-you… just now… caused a disturbance…” one of them refuted me while stil twitching on the ground. I

only laughed through my nose.

“Phew. I never said ‘you guys can’t cause a disturbance,’ did I?”

“That logic…!”

“Setting logic and methods aside! You guys were about to

cause some trouble and I prevented it, OK?

That said… Now, let's get a confession out of you right away. Who hired al of you?"

"No way… er, if I don't talk…?"

"Burst Rondo."

CHUDODODODODON!

"Now. Wil you tel me?"

"…Tel …you?"

"Your employer ♥"

". . . . Mr. Brahn . . . to the west . . . ."

"Mm-hm! Thank you for your cooperation!"

"Um… this is al … how could you just…"

In response to whatever High Priest Kereth was mumbling, I just waved my hand.

"You don't need to worry about it! If you think of it as being a divine work of God then it shouldn't bother

you, right?"

"What kind of god is that…?"

"Wel , anyway. It's not that I can't understand the sentiment of wanting to leave flowers but… It real y is

better if you refrained from going out. The thugs you saw just now seemed to have a pretext, so they'l

probably be causing more trouble.” Going off of what I said, Gourry nodded heavily and added, “Yeah,

and we stil don’t know who assassinated the head priest. If you wander around aimlessly, they might aim

for you.”

UGH!

At that the air around us froze.

Th… This… Mayonnaise head!

“Ah…! A-Assassin…?” Kereth said in a hoarse voice. “Then…! Our head priest real y was murdered?!”

“Yeah. That’s what she told me anyway. Only the head priest’s room was seriously burned, and some

other stuff… Right, Lina?”

Each word struck my skul with a thwack! Thwack! You… You…!

“Anyway, at that, it’d be good if you didn’t go wandering around aimlessly.”

“U-Understood…! Mr. Luke, Miss Milina, Let’s go!” He said with his face a deep shade of blue, and then

he left quickly as if he was running away.

“Yeah. Be careful, okay?” Gourry just smiled and waved as they turned their backs.

“WORMS FOR BRAINS!!”

BAM!

“Bah–!” I delivered a ful power kick to Gourry’s back.

“What was that for, Lina?!”

“What the hel was that?! Why would you just say that al of a sudden Gourry?!”

“Huh…?” Gourry knit his brow and cried out like an idiot, and I leaned in close to him and lowered my

voice.

“Why did you just tel him that the head priest was assassinated?!”

“Huh? But… The way he talked, he sounded like he was just quietly returning, so I thought…”

“Look! For now, it’s not clear to everyone if the fire was an accident or a murder!”

“But you made it clear, so isn’t it okay?”

“It is not! Wel , it’s not real y a bad thing on it’s own, but it’s bad to let people know about it right now!”

“…why?”

Raaugh! This bird-brain!

“Look! If we tell the four high priests that are opposing each other that the fire was possibly an accident,

they might act relatively docile. But if the assassin story gets

spread around, they'l a1 act out at once! For example, High Priest Francis who we just met! You'l think he's joking when he says 'I knew it was an

assassin! I must take care of this!' but then he might attack the other three high priests! But more than

that! The culprit might be among the high priests! If that's true, there's no doubt the culprit would act

before we could stop him. If the murderer was exposed, no matter how many people he killed afterward, it

wouldn't matter. There could be an al out attack to get rid of the other high priests, but before that, his first targets would unmistakably be… us. The one's who led the investigation!"

"…whoa."

"Not whoa! If it's turned out like this, there's no other way. If we're only a little pushy, we won't stop the culprit. And before our enemy makes a full-scale movement…"

"Then… what should we do?"

"For now… Our destination hasn't changed. The temple of Airlord Vaarwin in the west, to meet High Priest

Brahn." Our plan of interaction didn't change considerably, but… There was a soft murmur within my

chest.

***

Representing the sky, it was a palace painted white and sky-colored, with a wide and thoroughly

maintained garden. Except for it's color, it had the exact same appearance as the East and North temples.

Incidentally, the East temple we visited was red, that is, brick-colored. Of course, because of all the recent disturbances, there weren't any worshipers around the temple.

But different from the East and North temples, we couldn't see any thugs hanging around in front. The

ones I sent flying out in the town probably came from here originally. They knew Kereth went to offer

flowers every morning, so they nonchalantly went out on their pretext, and faced my judgment– or

something like that. Well, whatever happened, it certainly made it easier for us to enter. Gourry and I, with

our hands on the entrance to the foyer, pushed open the doors–

"Ugh–!" at the same time, we groaned a little. Inside… it was thick with the choking stench of blood.

TWO: Sellentia, When the Flame of Hatred is Lit

Instantly, without saying anything, Gourry ran inside. I couldn't hear anything, but I continued after him.

The interior was exactly the same as the two temple branches we visited earlier. The only difference– this

one had several corpses strewn about the passageway.

Some of them were priests, but probably double that amount were thugs. The assassins probably chose

to raid the place when the security was weak. We eventually turned a corner and ran down a long

hal way. Directly in front of us there was a door. If the building's structure was the same, then this should

be the high priest's private room.

"Hah!" Gourry stopped and with a yell, he drew his sword and sliced through the air.

There was a smal sound, like something rupturing. I didn't see whatever happened behind me, but it was

probably…

An outstretched hallway lined with pillars. And then the sporadically scattered bodies. From the shadow of

a pillar, a black figure appeared. An assassin?! He was still in the building?! And not just one. From the

shadows of the pillars, a total of four appeared. Sensing us drawing near, they concealed their presences

and their bodies. They were probably planning on attacking us suddenly but– With their bloodlust rising,

and sensing Gourry's wild instincts, the enemy intercepted us by launching projectile weapons. If we could

somehow manage to capture one alive, we could find out who hired them. All right. In that case–

Gourry readied his sword and slowly closed the distance between them. Standing behind him, I grabbed

the edge of his clothes and pulled him back.

“Who are you people?!” Catching onto my signal, he stopped and yel ed at the assassins. “Did you defeat

everyone here?! What about the high priest?!” Of course, if these were pro assassins they wouldn’t have

answered his questions. They only snorted at his nonsense. But, his nonsense questions did buy us some

time! I released the spell I had been casting.

“Sleeping!”

“Wh–?!” gasps of astonishment leaked from the assassins mouths.

From its name, this is a spell that puts everyone within a fixed range to sleep. By stopping Gourry from

closing in on them, I was able to cast a sleeping spell on the enemy alone. This way we could capture

them.

“…gh…”

“…mm…”

Two of the fal en assassins groaned. The other two… weren’t

effected at al ?! Now that I think about it,

I've heard that the maximum number of minds this spel can effect is pretty low but…

One of the remaining assassins was lunging toward Gourry with a large dagger, and the other was

headed for his fallen comrades. He was planning on waking them up so they could all attack. But with this

spel , you fal asleep temporarily, and you can't just wake right up again. With one of them charging at

Gourry, he unleashed an attack with his sword. As they were approaching each other, the assassin drew

an arc with his dagger. And then, just before the blades were about to meet, the assassin pulled out

another dagger with his left hand. His strategy was to catch the blow with the dagger in his right hand, and

in the moment when he stopped Gourry's attack, he would strike with he dagger in his left.

However! With one attack, Gourry sliced through the dagger and the assassin! Setting aside the contents

of his brain, when it came to swordsmanship, Gourry was a genius. And on top of that, he has this sword

now. It's proudly the sharpest sword of al time, with its name passed down through legends, the Blast

Sword. With Gourry's skil and the Blast Sword together, it's no surprise that this was possible. The

assassin fell without making a sound. And now there were only three left. Or so I thought.

Boom!

There was the sound of an intense explosion. One of the assassins had placed his hand against the wall

of the corridor and that's where the explosion came from. The spel he used was probably Blast

Wave. That way he was able to open a whole in the wall, which he used to flee outside. What a strange

occurence. The one just now left behind his sleeping comrades. It can't be–!

I panicked and ran over toward them. The two assassins that should have been sleeping had had their

throats slit. *Bastard!*

The one that got away, ran over to these two, and when he couldn't wake them, he sent them into eternal

slumber. All that just to seal their mouths. Using this method, he must have been a pro, otherwise he'd

just be a homicidal maniac.

"Lina!" As Gourry ran toward me, I just shook my head.

"It's no use. They were kil ed by the one that just ran away."

“Are we gonna fol ow him?!”

“No… It’s probably useless. More than that, right now we need to check inside the room. I already have a

general idea… of the results…” And it was just as I had imagined. Inside the room, mixed in among

several mercenaries, was a man clad in priests robes.

The western High Priest, Brahn Concnielle.

***

The town was in an uproar. But that was natural. Someone had hired assassins to kill one of the high

priests. And the worst part was that this was clearly a murder. Now all the rumors that the head priest had

been murdered, were even more tinged with the truth. In the end, we couldn’t find out the assassins’

identities, which meant we couldn’t find out who hired them. Of course, after this incident the officials had

a mountain of questions for us. Luckily, the Sorcerer’s Guild was able to verify my identity and we were

allowed to leave. However. It was only on the condition that until this case is solved, we aren’t al owed to

leave the city. The next day the two of us went to visit the high priest of the south, Ryan Seinfort.

“You two?! You were the ones who witnessed yesterday’s

incident from the very beginning!" When we

met him he didn't even introduce himself. He just impulsively got on his high horse.

He was around forty years old. He had brown hair with occasional streaks of gray, a strong physique and

a low, refined voice. I felt like if he preached in a calmer voice, he might be a dignified clergyman. But,

surrounded by maybe ten mercenaries, leaning back in his chair and yelling to the point where it was no

use trying to talk to him– he was nothing but a short-tempered old man.

"Don't tel me… Is being a mediator for the Sorcerer's Guild just a front and you're actual y assassins from

someone else?! Eh?!"

I honestly wasn't sure if he was this neurotic because someone in his line of work was killed or because

he was the one behind all of this. It goes unsaid, but once you suspect someone, everything will seem

suspicious. But even knowing that, this guy is *really* mad. I kept nodding at him.

"Wel , certainly given your disposition, it wouldn't be mysterious if you invoked someone's malice to the

point where they would send assassins but…"

“What?!”

“Wel , for now you can rest at ease. We aren’t like that. We have no intention of fol owing *someone like*

you around.”

“…Hey now, Lina…” Gourry spoke out against my provocations, but for now I ignored him. High Priest

Ryan was turning red with anger.

“Wh–! *Someone like me*–?! What a rude–!”

“Ah. Please don’t worry about it. Compared to someone who rudely sends assassins for their first

meeting, insulting someone on the first meeting isn’t so rude.” I said with a big grin.

“Gh–!”

“Anyway.” I distinctly interrupted him in the middle of whatever he was about to say. I understand that

you’re anxious, but please don’t make any rash decisions after nightfal . There’s a chance that someone

may believe that you’re the one behind all of this. Don’t forget that. Wel then, we’l be off.”

“Ngh–! Grr–!” After making a one-sided statement and leaving Ryan in the middle of what he was saying,

we turned our backs on the mercenaries with their rising bloodlust, and left the room.

“Hey, hey! Was that real y okay, Lina? What you said in there?” As we headed for the branch exit, Gourry

spoke to me in a low voice.

“It’s fine. If he isn’t behind this, then I just made it so his anger would be directed at us instead of the other high priests. On the other hand, if he is behind this, he would aim for us before the other high priests. And

then the tables would turn and this case would be solved quickly and efficiently.”

“I see… So you weren’t just back-talking.”

Ack.

“Uhh, natural y. I thought you’d say something like that.”

“For some reason that ‘uhh’ just now was a little suspicious…”

“A-All in your imagination!” As we left the building we were talking about things like that when–

“Yo.”

Waiting for us were two familiar faces.

“Luke! Milina!” I looked al around but I couldn’t see High Priest Kereth anywhere. We walked toward the

two of them.

“What’s wrong? It seems like High Priest Kereth isn’t around… Don’t tel me, he was ogling over Milina so

Luke knocked him out and you lost your jobs?”

“That’s likely, but it didn’t happen.” Milina quietly answered my question. “We’re out on dispatch from High

Priest Kereth.”

“Dispatch?” I asked as I raised an eyebrow. This time Luke answered.

“Yeah. Because of what happened yesterday. He heard that the head priest had been murdered and now

he can’t help wanting to have this case solved. He said since the officials couldn’t see that it was a

murder, he can’t depend on them. But the two of you aren’t enough on your own, so he sent some trusted

friends to help you out.”

“Wel … that’s fine but… Aren’t you his guards?”

“Even with us, he’s stil worried.. But because of what happened yesterday, he hired legitimate soldiers

and now he has plenty of guards. If the one concerned about it

says it’s fine, then it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Hmm…” I only vaguely agreed to everything Luke said. The problem was High Priest Kereth’s true

intentions. Luke said this was because of yesterday, but normally you wouldn’t strengthen your forces just

because of that. You can certainly use legitimate soldiers as guards. Even looking around the south

temple, I could see soldiers. There were probably around five or six of them. But if they were sent out to

other temples, without changing the amount, and they had to face assassins, then this wasn’t an amount

you could rest easy with.

Of course, High Priest Kereth remembers the incident with rage and has a strong desire for it to be

solved. That’s the most favorable explanation. But thinking about it another way, since we’re mediators for

the Sorcerer’s Guild, it may be more advantageous for him in the eventual head priest decision meeting if

he creates an obligation of gratitude to himself. In the worst case, he’s the mastermind in all this and he’ll feel that it’s actually more of a burden to have us so close to Luke and Milina, so he’ll come up with some

vague reasoning and impose some decision on us.

–But I can’t help thinking otherwise. At any rate, if we increase the number of help, it will definitely be

more convenient.

“Understood. I could use your help.”

“Sure. So, first off, where do we go from here?”

“First we should gather information. In this area, there’s a row of cheap hotels. It’s a pretty shady place.”

The place was in the southern tip of the city. All of the filthy houses and suspicious shops and suspicious

taverns were al lined up and down a gloomy street. Natural y it’s a place where hoodlums gather, at least

that’s the kind of picture it paints. Heading further south from the southern temple branch you would reach

downtown. This is cal ed the city of temples, and in any city that’s more than just a place for people to live in, there will always be a place like this. Our enemy is a pro assassin. If he was hiding himself it would

probably be around here. If they were coming from the wire-puller, the assassins would have an innocent

look to them and they’d be mixed in among the guarding mercenaries. At least, that would be the most

convenient method. That way, by simple contact, they could become temporary guards.

Conversely, if the assassin ended up being hired by his target, he wouldn't have exposed his own face.

He probably conceals himself elsewhere, and then at certain scheduled times, he'l visit the wire-puller

and receive his orders. If that's the case that's where we need to visit first. Well, they could do something

unexpected and stay at a luxury hotel at the heart of the city, but that's not likely since it would be easy to trace.

"So then… I think… we should split up. Me and Gourry, and then Luke and Milina, then we can gather

information. It's not *necessary* but…"

"Oh wel . I think it'd be fine if we divided the work." said Luke.

"In that case… If you expose your urge to kil , you won't surprise anyone. Now, are you going to come out

quietly?" At my announcement, it was silent for a moment and then–

"I can't real y help if it leaks out." Alongside the voice, a man's figure appeared from the shadows.

One… two… From the shadows here on this street. From shadows over there. They appeared in

succession, but they weren't assassins. From the way they looked, they must have been thugs, about ten

of them.

“The sight of you guys loitering around here is real y an eyesore. It’s almost painful to look at.” said a man with a scar on his cheek. He looked like he was their boss. Hmm… I thought a bit, then started casting a

small spell in my mouth.

“Heh. You seem like a nice guy.” Luke snorted. “I think you might be about as promising an opponent as a

pile of fish.”

“The hel you say?!” Anger colored the boss’ face. “You makin’ fun of us?! We’l show you!”

“Yeah!” The little fishes cried out, and came rushing at us all at once. At that moment–

“Diem Wing!” I released the spel I had been casting. My spel produced a strong gust of wind that was

capable of blowing away a child with an umbrel a, but not enough to kil or wound anyone. But I wasn’t

aiming for the thugs. I released my spell directly above. Instantly–

BOOM!

There was an explosion with a bright light just above our heads.

“Wha–!?” The thugs cried out in shock. Of course, it wasn’t my spel that had exploded. My spel had

collided with a fireball that had been released from a rooftop, causing it to scatter in midair. There's no

mistake that the spell came from some assassins hiding up on the roof. They were probably sent by the

wire-puller to kill us.

But of course they knew with all of these thugs around, they couldn't compete. In spite of al that, they

were hired to attack weaklings like this. In that case, we were just a lure. The likely winner would probably

be the assassins. Hidden on the rooftops of the surrounding buildings and suppressing their bloodlust,

while these street thugs gave off an intense desire to kill, they were able to attack. Reading that, I cast a

spell to intercept theirs. And it seems I got a bulls-eye.

"..H-Hey! You didn't even flinch! You're just showing off your fancy spel s!" The boss man shouted.

"Y-Yeah!" blindly fol owing him, the other thugs started rushing toward us again!

Hey! Could these guys use their brains a little bit?! If they don't pay attention, these thugs wil get caught in an attack from the real assassins. In fact, if I hadn't intercepted that firebal just now, they would have gotten caught in it. But without realizing that, the thugs just continued to underestimate us and plunge

forward without thinking about anything. Just then–

“Freeze Arrow.” Milina’s ice spel crashed into a number of thugs and quickly incapacitated them. Next,

Gourry drew his sword.

“Hah!” With a yel , he sliced through the air.

“Gyaahhwaaaaagh!”

After a strange sound, a number of the thugs cried out and went flying. But he hadn’t hit them with part of

the blade. He had struck them with the bel y of the sword. Wel … doing something like that is kind of

ridiculous. It would have broken… if it were a normal sword. Going against this many enemies with

Gourry’s seriousness and the Blast Sword, I feel like that was kind of immature.

Luke went running at the thugs with his sword. I began casting my next spell while fighting back with my

short sword. Clearly, the thugs’ skil s were on par with low level soldiers so this would be an easy victory.

That is– there wasn’t even a contest. But these guys weren’t our real enemies. The moment we made

contact with them…

Pssh. There was a smal sound overhead, like something bursting. I knew they’d come! I separated

myself from the thug I was matched with and jumped far back,

opening the space between us. I took my

sword in hand, raised it at a slight angle– and threw it into the sky.

Instantly.

An awful noise echoed above us, as if the sky was being torn apart. A countless number of lights

converged on the short sword I had cast away, and made a direct hit with the thug right beneath it.

When the hidden assassins threw a fireball, I was able to sense it and defend against it. Because of that,

this time they used a lightning spel with a wide scope that couldn't be deflected with a wind spel . But I

sensed it again, and throwing my sword into the air, it became a lightning rod.

…which was unfortunate for the thug directly underneath it.

"Wench! Using such strange tricks–!" And once again, the boss shouted after mistaking it for my spell.

Daaahh! You're so slow! Don't you realize anything?!

From the roofs and windows of nearby buildings, a number of black figures swooped down to the

battlefield. The assassins came out! Since I kept defending against their spells, they appeared to stop the

numbing.

“Wh-What the–?! Fine! It doesn’t matter! We’l take both of you on!” Without comprehending the situation

at al , the thugs’ boss handed down another stupid order.

Hold on! Are you serious?! Are you thinking at all?! Hey!

And that’s when the free-for-all started. I easily evaded one of the thugs charging at me, then wrapped

around to the back of his flailing body and chopped him in the back of his head.

“Gegh!” He made a weird cry and grabbed his neck for support, while I kicked his legs out from under him,

causing him to make a half-turn. I grabbed the short-sword that slipped out of his hands and used it as a

replacement for the sword I had just thrown away. The moment I got the sword into my hands, a black

shadow appeared in my field of vision. An assassin! His hand moved in my direction. Was that a throwing

knife?! But right at that moment–

“You bitch!” Another thug, a friend of the opponent I just defeated, jumped at me.

Waagh! Moron!

With a thick, dul sound, the thug’s body quivered a little and he col apsed where he was. From the

assassin’s perspective, he would have seen him jump in front of

the knife and catch it in his back. He

couldn't have been expected an interruption like that. The assassin's movement stopped momentarily.

"Freeze arrow!" I released the spell I was casting! But the one I was aiming for was a pro. He promptly

jumped back and avoided a direct hit from my spell, taking shelter among the thugs. In exchange, some of

the thugs around him took a direct hit and were frozen.

"Ahh!"

"Bitch!"

All of them cried out at once and rushed toward me.

Hey! If you're gonna keep picking a fight with us, don't complain! If things continue like this, you're al

gonna get blasted away! With a hard decision to make, I began chanting a spell in my mouth.

***

At that moment the other three had their own fights developing. With his sword, Gourry slashed through

the swords of the thugs and repelled throwing knives from the assassins. The moment that he stopped

their attacks, one or two people went crawling away. Luke was catching blows from thugs one right after

another. As one of the opponents was flailing, Luke kicked into

his flank and struck another enemy as he

drew near.

“Gwah!”

And then to finish both of them off– “Dug Wave!”

BOOM!

–he used an attack spell. One of the assassins came running at him.

“Die, Bastard!” At the same time, one of the thugs came charging at the assassin. The assassin hurriedly

countered.

Both men were probably hired by the same person, but the thugs were never informed that the assassins

were allies. Well, that makes sense. If you have a pile of men working on your side, you shouldn’t just tel

them ‘Hey, you guys are just decoys. The assassins are gonna attack from above, so you guys will just

have to die with the enemy, okay? ♥’ But this situation happened all because I went melee in order to

defend against the assassin’s attack spel s.

Milina was also repelling the thugs sword attacks. “Fel Za Rhed!” Without looking back, she suddenly fired

her spell in a different direction. There, an assassin had drawn

near by hiding in the shadow of one of the

thug's body. He probably didn't think she'd be able to read his own movements. She blew him away with a

direct hit.

"D-Don't make fun of us!" With his sword drawn and his back bent, a young, blonde thug came plunging at

her. Once again Milina swung her sword at face-height.

"Heee!" The thug quickly crouched down, and using that energy he flopped forward, the momentum

causing him to graze Milina's flank with his sword. She responded by–

"Gweh!?"

Stepping on his back and taking on a new opponent. At that point I had completed my spell.

"Dimil ua Wing!"

FWOOOSH!

An explosion of wind blew away one of the assassins and a number of thugs. All right. With that we'd

greatly reduced their numbers.

"T-These guys are tough!" one of the thugs cried out. …but y'know, it's a little late to just be noticing that now.

Only a short time had passed since the fight had started but we had already reduced the number of thugs

by half, and we had defeated two of the assassins which meant there were only three left. That's when the

thug boss spoke up.

"If you're gonna go this far then we real y can't forgive you! Time to get serious!"

Get serious?! Usual y you'd just run away!

"YEAH!" the thugs let out an energetic cry. Real y, you guys just need to stop.

"OH YEAAAHH" The one with the most fired-up cry came charging with his sword ready. While I chanted

my spell, I took my short sword and–

That instant, a strange feeling ran down my back. Almost reflexively, I took a great jump to the side. My

cape tore as it fluttered. *Fwip*. With a small sound, the man who had been running toward me shivered, spurted blood, and fell down where he stood.

What the hell?!

Someone had thrown a knife from behind me, and because I dodged it, this thug ate it directly. From the

situation it seems that whatever was thrown just now wasn't a knife. And I feel like it was too sharp to

have been a wind spell.

“Careful! There’s something weird going on!” Just in case, I cal ed out a warning to everyone.

“Something weird?!” Luke asked as he finished off a thug with a kick.

“What does that mean?!” And Gourry fol owed after slashing through an assassin. And then…

“So you final y realized it…” The one who said it, was one of the thugs. Those words were a signal for the

fight to stop.

“Huh? What?”

“What the…? What’s going on?” Among the thugs, some made confused faces and whispered to

themselves.

“I’ve had enough of this act.” The thug boss said.

“Act…? What are you talking about?! Hey!”

“You don’t need… to know.” As he said it, a number of the thugs moved.

“–gh!”

“Gaugh!”

Sometimes from their throats, sometimes from their chests, and sometimes from their sides. The men

who didn’t move spurted blood and col apsed. The ones they thought were their comrades had caught

them by surprise. There was a difference in skill from the start, so of course they did this easily. All that

was left was three thugs– no, three men that appeared to be thugs, and two assassins.

“What the hel ’s going on?! Huh?!”

“There were assassins mixed in with the street thugs.” I answered Gourry.

They did all that talking without running away and continuing to fight a useless fight, all so that we would

lower our guard. But to do that, they had to attack their own men, as hard as they could. What were they

planning on doing if I hadn’t defended against their spel s? Bastards…

“I guess it can’t be helped that you noticed it… And now that we’ve removed al these annoyances… we

can al get serious.” The expression vanished from the scarred face of the man who had acted as the

boss. His face changed from that of a third rate thug boss to that of one who lived in darkness.

They’re coming!

The assassins all kicked the ground at once. At the same time, Gourry dashed forward. He attacked by

passing right by one of them and bisecting him.

“Flare Arrow!” Luke and Milina simultaneously released spells piercing the remaining four.

“Gah?!”

Only one assassin took the hit directly and collapsed with a scream. The other three– took a direct hit, but

continued rushing forward. It wasn’t effective?! Luke and Milina appeared slightly disturbed.

“Jah!” One of them– the blond one who Milina had stepped on –swung his left arm. He was outside of

sword reach. Milina immediately jumped to the side

“–ck!?” Both of her arms had shal ow cuts. It didn’t look like the enemy had thrown anything. No way– a

wind shockwave?! That means these guys are…!

“Milina!” Luke panicked and ran toward her, but someone else was standing in his path– The one who

appeared to be the boss.

“I won’t let you go.”

“You’re in my way!”

He caught Luke’s sword with his own. Suddenly, a lance of fire appeared between Luke and the man.

Luke retreated back and as it was released, he twisted his neck to avoid it.

One of the remaining ones came charging at me, preparing his

hands in a strange position. *You think I'll*

let you do that? I released the spell I had prepared.

"Blast Ash!"

Blackness formed above the enemy and swallowed him. I got lucky in that I happened to cast this spell. If

I had cast something like a firebal …

Gourry immediately turned to cover Milina. But when he saw him coming, Milina's opponent jumped back,

widening the distance between him and Gourry.

"Forgive me for not being eager to fight in close quarters with you!" He said to Gourry. He continued as he

looked around and noticed the guy who had been turned to dust by my spell. "Ch! That was probably the

guy that kept saying not to take him lightly… Then he fails. Get back, Zaikel!" According to the blond

man's voice, the man dueling with Luke jumped back.

"Who the hel are these guys…?"

"You haven't noticed?" I said to a slightly dumbfounded Luke.

"Now that you mention it, we have fought these guys before." Gourry said as he remembered his instincts.

"Yeah, it's just as Gourry says. We previously fought their accomplices." I said. Just now, when they took

Luke and Milina's Flare arrows head on without a scratch, and when the lance of flame appeared without

reciting an incantation. The ones who can do things like that are…

"*Mortal demons.* "

***

Previously in the city of Solaria, there was a madman burning with the ambition to revive his ruined

kingdom. In doing this he called forth demons from the Astral Plane to possess humans– no, to fuse with

humans, producing beings of strong magical power. They are unaffected by low-level sorcery and have a

good command over simple spells without reciting incantations– The magical power of a Lesser Demon

and the knowledge of a man. And while it has the flesh of a human being it is still able to cross through

space. For my own convenience, I called them mortal demons. The four of us plus one other, through our

efforts, we were able to crush this madman wrapped in his own ambitions. But I can't believe I'm meeting

the refugees of that event in a place like this.

It makes sense. When the Sleeping spel wasn't effective at the west temple, the problem wasn't so much

that their spirits were too worked up, but that they weren't even entirely human… Which means they

wouldn't have been hurt by a direct hit from a Firebal or a raging thunder attack. Letting their friends hit

them from above wasn't such an unreasonable tactic after al .

"Mortal demons? Wel it doesn't matter what you cal us." The blond man said with a smile. "At any rate,

we have a debt to repay from 'that one time."

"That one time?" I said with a scowl. Certainly the time we were in Solaria, we should have defeated all of

them.

"You don't remember? Wel then… I'l remind you!" As he said it he swung his left hand. He didn't throw

anything but… Instantly Gourry pushed his was in front of me, brandishing his sword.

It was the same sound I had heard at the west temple, a sound like something rupturing. This is…! There

was no mistaking it. With a wave of his left hand he had produced an invisible shockwave, which

transformed into a blade as it was released. The fused human-demons we fought in Solaria had this same

kind of power. But…

"There's… no way…"

“Oh? Your face says you might remember something.”

“But you should be dead!”

“I didn’t die. You cut through my stomach, so al you did was separate my upper body from my lower

body. Where have you been until now that you would think I was dead?” He revived from that condition?!

And to say such irrational things so easily…

“Now that you say that… Even though this guy’s boss was cut in half, he was stil happy and energetic…”

Luke said in a dark tone.

Then it’s just as I thought. This guy is–

“Zord… was it? I’m sure…”

“Right, right. Just as you say. Seems you’ve remembered.” Zord answered me with a grin. “Our comrades

weren’t in Solaria alone. Because of that time, we were scattered all over the place. More than

that… Back then, you took out our boss. Thanks to you, I now have to take on a job like this until that debt

is properly repaid. …Wel , since our number of al ies has been reduced, we’ll have to withdraw for today.

“Hey, Hey. Don’t make us laugh.” Luke snorted. “You think you can say that and we’l just obediently say

‘sure, go ahead’ and let you go?” At his most ordinary of

ordinary comment, Zord snorted right back at

him.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey. You real y think you could fol ow us and defeat us? Huh? Is that okay? Wel , you’re

probably pretty healthy but… what about the girl over there?”

Wh…?

“…What?” Luke murmured in a hoarse voice. Heartbroken. Milina dropped to her knees where she was

standing.

?!

“Khahahaha! Wel then! If you want to fol ow us, then you can fol ow us!” Zord and Zaikel turned away

leaving only a sneer.

“Milina?!” In a panic, Luke rushed to her side. Her usual y white skin was noticeably paler. Obviously, this

was a case where we couldn’t chase after Zord.

“I…was careless…” She said has she clutched her side. Now that I think about it… When Zord was

disguised as a thug, he dropped in front of Milina and grazed her side with his sword.

Don’t tel me–?!

“Poison… right…?” Milina said, starting to sweat a little.

I thought so. Zord had been slowly prolonging the battle. By trying to get us to remember him, he was just

waiting for the poison to take circulate.

“Wait a minute!” I hurriedly tried to cast a spel , holding my hand out over Milina.

“Decleary.” I was trying an antidote spel . There was no way of knowing what kind of poison I needed to

neutralize, but it was worth a try. It would be nice if this was effective but… “In the end, this a medical

emergency. This is the exact time where we would need a healer

with us!”

“Hey! Hang in there, Milina!” Luke said as he carried her on his back, and began casting a spell. “Ray

Wing!” With a wind spell, they took off into the sky.

***

“You don’t have any healers?!”

At the woman’s words, Luke voice spiked with the rage. We were at a healing clinic in the south end of the

city.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Th-They’re on dispatch to their own temples!” The woman said, overpowered by Luke’s vigor. “The

healers in this city are deployed from the temples! Because of all the fighting between the high priests, for

some reason they were al cal ed back to their respective branches! I’m only here to disperse medicinal

herbs for minor illnesses so–”

“So they’re at the temples!” Without listening to the end of her explanation, Luke went running off again,

Milina breathing lightly on his back. Just as I thought, we weren’t fortunate enough that normal healing

spells would be useful against the poison Zord used.

***

“But there should be one here!” Luke’s voice was already practically a scream. We were at the temple of

Airlord Rangort in the south side of the city. We told them we had someone who had taken on poison, and

we asked to quickly see a healer. The mercenary on watch went inside for a moment. When he returned,

his answer was– They didn’t have anyone like that here.

“I came here because I was told someone would be here! There’s no reason someone like that wouldn’t

be here!”

“That’s what I was told.” The mercenary smiled as if he was scoffing and continued, “Our high priest said

there was no one like that here. You don’t believe me? Oh, that’s right. He also said, since you work for

the north temple, couldn’t you just get Kereth to heal you? Wel , that’s just his opinion.”

“Bastard!”

“Luke!”

Luke rushed at them, but I stopped him.

“Shouting at them won’t solve anything. You might be able to get them to drag out their healer if you

defeat them al , but they’d probably cut corners in their

treatment. So what do you want to do?" Luke was

silent for a moment.

"Let's head for the North temple."

***

From the window, al sorts of green trees rustled as the wind crossed over them. So calm… Such a calm

afternoon…

"Is there anything… they can do for us?"

We were at a room in the North temple. Lying on a bed, Milina spoke in a quiet voice.

As if she wasn't speaking at al .

Gourry and I, along with High Priest Kereth had left the room Deep anguish was carved into the high

priest's face.

Why couldn't you get al of the poison out? Why couldn't you use Recovery?

As Luke criticized him, the High Priest Kereth could only continue with,

I'm sorry.

That was all.

As we left the room, the door closed and I saw Milina lying on the bed, reaching out to touch Luke's

cheek.

***

When the door opened, Luke wasn't there. The window had been opened and the curtain rustled in the

breeze.

I saw Milina lying on the bed quietly, as if she were asleep.

***

Two days had passed since Luke disappeared. Of course that didn't mean we hadn't been doing

anything. We continued going around gathering information and looking for Zord and the other one–

Zaikel, who had run away. I didn't think their allies would foolishly give up their information, but we'd seen their faces. This would still make the search easy. And so, evening fell. The name of a one-man

information shop had come up. –And until it did, I can't even remember how many thugs I had to beat up,

but that doesn't real y matter now. Gourry and I ascended the stairs of the cheap apartment where the

informant lived.

"–?!"

Arriving in the dim hallway, we both stopped.

Various smells mingled int the old, dirty hallway. Among all of

the foul smells, was a fresh one. Spilled

blood. There was one door facing the hallway, left slightly open. That's where we were headed, the

informant's room.

We started running at the same time, the two of us barging into the room. Inside, there was a single man

covered in blood. He was lying there. Our information shop had a problem. His body had been cut up. But

he was still breathing.

"H-Hee…" when he saw us the man spoke up.

"St… please… stop… didn't I say… where they were…?"

…!

At that moment I started to understand just what the hell had happened there.

"Could you tell me where Zord and Zaikel are? *One more time*?"

"Th-They went west… toward Sea Flower Pavilion… didn't I tel you…?" He said almost crying. He hadn't

realized that his opponent had changed.

"Understood. We'l c a l someone for you." Gourry and I descended the stairs and bribed the manager with

a gold coin and asked him to call for a healer, then headed for

the place we heard from the information

shop.

“What’s going on, Lina?”

“*Luke was here.* ” I answered Gourry with my face stiff. There’s no doubt the reason he disappeared was

for revenge. These past two days he’s been gathering news, and he arrived at this place one step ahead

of us. For now we’l find this Sea Flower Pavilion and–

Searching was unnecessary.

KABOOM!

Suddenly, light and sound scattered as a building in our path exploded.

There! We dashed hurriedly in that direction. Astonished neighbors peeked around. The building was a

fountain of flames, flaring up. Lying in the street before it, mixed in with the burning splinters, there was a cheap copper signboard with some sort of flower engraved on it.

I knew this was it… that means…

“Over there!” Gourry said and started running. The people in the area were surprised and afraid. Impatient

and screaming. The heat from the fire and the sound of it popping. Among all sorts of sounds and

emotions mixed in with al the chaos, only one stood out. I

didn’t real y understand but it came flowing

from one direction. It was… *Hatred*.

What was probably over there, was the source of it, where Luke was. We headed toward the flames. It

seemed the fight was going on behind this inn. Gourry turned a corner and entered an alleyway. We went

running through the narrow street and suddenly emerged in a spacious area. Among a jumbled row of

buildings, there was a wide open space. We could see the burning inn nearby. There, something was

lying on the ground. Long things. Short things. A large mass. Something round.

“…!”

Gourry and I were at a loss for words. Without a doubt.

They were body parts.

There was a scar on the round one. Zaikel.

At that time I noticed someone there.

“Gah– Gyaaaahh!” Accompanied by a shriek, something dropped from the edge of the clearing.

A leg.

...?!

Gourry and I looked up. On the roof of a building facing the

clearing, the flames roaring behind him, he

was there, transformed into a black silhouette. He was crouching down and it looked like he was holding

something in his hand. His other arm moved. The blade he held glared orange.

“G-Gyaaaaghbaaahh!” Whatever he was holding writhed and shrieked.

Plop.

Something dropped into the clearing. But I didn’t even feel like checking what it was.

“Who was it?” The one holding the other asked quietly as his hands moved. It was Luke’s voice. “Who

hired you?”

“B-But… I told you… didn’t I…?! In the east… Francis…”

“I can’t hear you very wel .” Luke said calmly as his arm moved again. And then Zord screamed.

“*Who was it?* Who hired you?”

“P… Please stob…”

“Hey. Answer my question.”

And once again, a sword flash and Zord’s shriek. And then very slightly, Zord’s body started wriggling as

he cried, “It was Francis! FrancisFrancisBranshissStobStobStob!!!!

“Hey. You’re getting kinda noisy.” Luke said as his hand–

“Luuuuuuuuuuke!” I final y cried out. It took a long time before I could snap out of my petrification. Slowly…

He turned toward us. A quiet light lurked in his eyes.

“Oh. It’s you guys. Don’t worry. I’l end this soon.” He spoke as if he was just chatting with us. His right

hand moved.

“Sht– STOPSTOP!” There was a smalwet sound. With that, Zord couldn’t say anything else.

“This is what you’ve been doing til now? How many are dead because of you? Huh?”

Slowly.

He stood up on the roof, flinging a splintered piece of debris into the flames.

“I’m going to settle things in a little while. In order to do that… I want you two to leave the city. I say that because… I don’t really want to show you the rest.” As he said it, he turned and vanished from the roof.

I didn’t follow him.

No. I couldn’t even move.

All this time, Luke’s despair must have been so deep. Hatred like this must be sleeping within everyone.

Grief, dread, these are things I real y haven’t known.

I feel… sick.

“Lina…” Gourry said quietly. “Lina… Are you okay…?”

I’m okay.

But instead of an answer, all that came out was sobbing. I nodded my head up and down a little.

“Luke… We have to stop him…”

“I know.”

Eventually I was able to reply to Gourry. And so the two of us turned and ran. Toward the East temple. To

stop Luke.

THREE: The Blood of Priests Spills at Dusk

Standing in the sunset, the temple of Vrabazard appeared to give off a blood-colored glow. It hadn't

changed from when we there before. There were still ruffians hanging around in front of it and it seemed

like there stil hadn't been any sort of disturbance there. Gourry and I walked straight ahead toward the

entryway.

"Hey, wait you two! Er… you're the ones hired by the sorcerer's Guild… What do you– Hey, Wait!" One of

the thugs yelled at us, but we didn't slow our pace. I only shot a glance at him.

"Someone's after the High Priest Francis' life. Let us see him."

"Wh…?" Rendered speechless, the thug entered the branch behind us. I already knew the building's

interior, so we headed straight ahead, for the high priest's room.

Bang! The door opened wide. Inside the room was the High Priest Francis and four men who appeared to

be mercenaries.

"Wh–" The high priest hovered above his chair as the guards became riled up. "What's this al of a

sudden?! What on earth–”

“Zord and Zaikel are dead.” I said firmly, without letting him finish what he was saying. With only that,

Francis froze.

“You know what that means… don’t you?”

“Ah….” he whispered in a hoarse voice. Francis sunk back down into his chair.

The soldiers, not really comprehending the situation, gripped the handles of their swords, as they all

mutually exchanged glances.

“I…” Francis, with a miserable look, weakly shook his head side to side. “It’s… not my fault…”

“Don’t screw around!” Gourry roared and Francis’ body shivered. The guards gripped their swords a bit

tighter. “Do you know how many are dead?! How many people do you think the assassins you hired

kil ed?!” At those words the soldiers stopped moving entirely. Natural y. They shouldn’t have heard

anything about Francis hiring assassins.

“You’re the one who kil ed Head Priest Joshua in the fire.”

“No… wrong… that’s wrong… listen to me…” He held his head in both hands and shook it side to side as

he he said weakly, “I had… a vision.”

“Huh?” I automatical y scowled. A vision…? Wait… why is he bringing this up al of a sudden?

“When Lord Joshua. Was lost to the fire… I lost my spiritual support. Why a good man like him? Why fire?

I prayed to the gods I believed in… to the great Ceiphied… to the great Vrabazard… And that night… I

heard a voice.”

“A voice?”

“It came to my ears as I prayed. Yes… it was certainly the divine voice of god. *The head priest’s death*

was no accident– An assassination by one of wicked heart– And whoever it was desired for this city to fall into a maelstrom of chaos– They’l aim for you too– You’ll need power to protect yourself– gather that

power and– I heard it! The voice of god!”

“…That’s ridiculous…” He didn’t seem to hear me. At least, he continued talking without it bothering him.

“That’s why I hired people… If the one who murdered the head priest was among the other high priests, I

was going to denounce him. *I know what you did. I won’t lose to you. Someday the evil deeds you*

accumulated will come to light. Originally, the ones I hired

were hot-blooded men who boasted of their power. But… The other high priests started hiring people… There was nothing I could do about it, so next

I hired mercenaries. If the man who murdered our head priest was among them, I couldn't lose to him…

And then everyone hired mercenaries… I… against my better judgement… hired an assassin by the

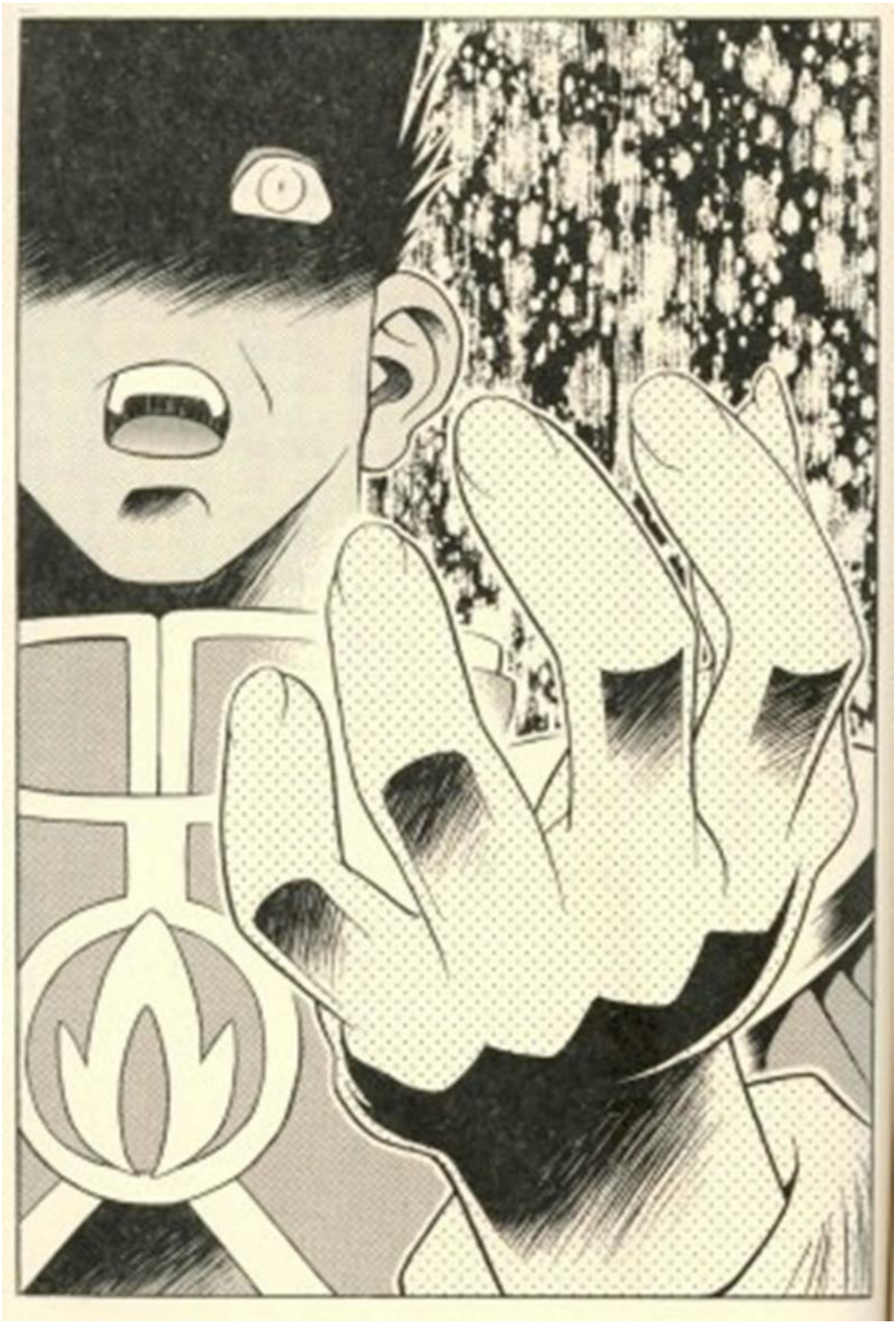
name of Zord…" as he said it his expression was colored with deep regret and affliction.

"And then… you ordered him to assassinate the high priest of the west, Brahn."

"No!" At that he looked up and raised his voice at me. "I didn't order for anything like that! I told them to

impede the other high priests movements! If the mercenaries they hired were injured, they'd be forced to

withdraw! That was all! But that man– The man named Zord acted of his own wil !"



“You think we’ll believe something like that?”

“It’s true!” he cried. “Some days before the incident with Brahn… When Zord came in with the evening

report, he was in an oddly good mood. I asked him what was going on and he said something like… he

was happy… because he ran into someone he knew… it couldn’t be… that was…”

Someone he knew... Wh–! It can’t be! A few days before High Priest Brahn was assassinated… That was

around the time we came to this city. On the outskirt of town we witnessed a fight between a warrior and

an assassin. If that guy was Zord…

“I was told Brahn was attacked by a number of assassins, but the only one I hired was Zord! That’s why I

thought it was done by someone else! But that night, Zord was smiling as he said… *This is what you*

wanted, isn’t it? I brought some of my friends together especial y for this... But that’s wrong! I… I never wanted this! All I wanted…!” He covered his face with both hands.

So that’s how it is. When Zord saw our faces, he probably decided not to fight two-against-one and

withdrew. But even though he retreated, his desire for revenge didn’t disappear. Zord wasn’t running wild

by disobeying orders and gathering comrades. That was all to drag out the duration of our fight. And

then… Milina…

“I didn’t order those things…” he spoke in a small voice, hanging his head and covering his face. And then

as if he knew what I was going to say, “I didn’t want Brahn to die… It… wasn’t my fault…”

“So you were thinking selfishly.” Suddenly, there was a voice.

Luke’s voice.

That moment, Francis’ entire body was wrapped in darkness

No one knew what had just happened. We all went stiff. There was an awful cracking sound and–

“GAAAAAHHH!!” Francis’ screams rang out.

Without understanding the situation, I stood there dumbfounded. Luke had attacked Francis. I knew that

much. But… the darkness that swal owed him and the sound of something being smashed… That’s it!

“Luke!” I screamed and dashed forward, climbing over the desk, and heading into the darkness that lurked

there.

“Lina!” Gourry hurriedly followed after me. I plunged into the darkness–

And slipped right out. There, was an orange colored world. Trimmed bushes, a stretch of stone pavement,

a small fountain, stone statues… And everything was colored madder red.

“Lina…” Continuing after me, Gourry emerged through the hole in the wal and looked around at the

scenery.

“Probably the courtyard.” I said. The high priest’s room faced the courtyard. A number of bodyguards and

priests were col apsed al around. Either they had lost consciousness or their lives. I wasn’t sure. But I

finally understood what had happened.

A Dark Mist spell. It’s a spel that produces a black fog which wraps around a fixed space and blocks the

target’s view. Luke had used it from the other side of the wall, swal owed Francis in it, and made it so we

wouldn’t be able to know what was going on. Then he used a different spel to break the wall and drag

Francis outside.

And so, with the light of sunset behind them, Francis and Luke stood atop the arch of the covered

passageway.

“So you fol owed… I expected that. Because it’s you two… I

thought you'd fol ow me." There was a

strained laugh in his voice. Right now, shadows formed on his face in such a way that I real y couldn't see

it. He held Francis in his arms, limp, with his head hung.

"Luke! Please, stop this! That man only hired Zord! He didn't order him to do any of this!"

"Yeah. I know. I heard through the wall. I understand the gist of things. That's why this one won't suffer as

much as Zord did."

Wha…?!

Francis' body slipped from his hands. From the edge of the roof, he tumbled to the ground.

"It's been a long time…" Luke said, his voice distant. "I used to do things like this… kil ing people for

money… that was my trade. When I met Milina, because of her, I washed my hands of al that. …I just

had to go and remember that… damn…"

"Luke… everything's fine now…" I said.

"No… not yet." He silently shook his head.

"Luke!"

"Don't get in my way. Wel , it's useless to say that to you. You two are always meddling…"

“You’re wrong!”

“I don’t think I’m right. I don’t even think I’m doing this tc please Milina… but if I don’t do this…” Luke cut himself off. He was silent for a moment, as he was covered by the wind sweeping across the twilight.

“W-What the hel ?!”

“There he is! Over there!” From behind me I heard the voices of guards who had finally come crawling out

of the hole in the wall. Taking that as his queue, Luke turned around.

“Luke!” At my voice, he only looked over his shoulder.

“Only a little longer. Don’t try and stop me… next wil be… south.” with that, he went running along the

roof.

“H-Hey! Fol ow him!”

“Wait there, you bastard!” The guards hurriedly chased after him. And I just stood there fixedly.

“Lina! After him!” Gourry urged me, but I didn’t move.

“Lina!”

“He said… not to stop him…” I said as if I was sighing. “Luke said so. He told us… not to stop him…”

“Lina…” Gourry moved so that he was directly in front of me and gripped both of my shoulders. “That’s not

like you, Lina. Do you know what I heard? When Luke was talking just now he said ‘stop me.’ That’s what

I heard.”

Ah…

I instinctively gulped.

That’s… right… Next will be South. Luke said that. But if he real y didn’t want us to interfere, would he

have told us that? If he got away while I was unprepared, and attacked the enemy he was aiming for, we

wouldn’t have been able to stop him. In spite of this, he specifically acted as if he was warning us. Which

means…

“I guess so…” I gave a little nod. Right now Luke is operating between two emotions. One being the

peace of mind that Milina gave him, the other was intense hatred for having her snatched away from him.

Somewhere between those two.

“Let’s go, Gourry.”

“Yeah.”

Following Boost, I cast another spell.

“Ray Wing!” With Gourry holding onto me, we took off with a high-speed flight spell. We headed to the

southern temple, where High Priest Ryan was.

***

The stars twinkled as the sky darkened. The sun had already sunk beneath ground level, and a red color

still remained on the west edge of the city, indicating its opposition to the faintly encroaching darkness.

Night had come. That was around the time when Gourry and I arrived at the west branch.

The strongly colored branch was called a tourist attraction, but since there are never many tourists left

walking around, the entrances closed at night. As we arrived here at the west shrine, the doors leading to

the foyer were already closed. In front of the door there was one legitimate soldier and a man who looked

like a mercenary standing watch.

"Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev, from the Sorcerer's Guild." Before they could speak up and ask our

identities, I introduced us and moved closer to the two men.

"…What's your business?" the soldier asked with a cautious look.

"We have received information that someone is aiming for High Priest Ryan's life. Let us meet with the

high priest."

“What?!” Both the soldier and the mercenary cried out in unison.

The mercenary immediately turned pale, “U-Understood… Let me guide you–”

“Wait!” The soldier stopped him. “I need you to tel me the whole story.”

“There’s no time!”

“Just give us the details! Why are you so eager to go in!?”

“We’ve decided to protect him!”

“If it’s just to protect him, the high priest already has several people doing that already!” I understood what the soldier was trying to say. He doubted that we weren’t here to assassinate High Priest Ryan. But

whatever reason we gave, he wouldn’t be in any more danger if we just went near him. Of course, when

they real y don’t know the situation, it’s reasonable to be this suspicious. It’s reasonable but, we can’t just say ‘oh okay’ and leave. Luke should be drawing near at this moment.

I looked around the area. My eyes stopped on a lamp near the entrance, lit with magic light. It stood

maybe a bit taller than me, on a post about as thick around as my wrist, with a statue of a maiden holding

a shallow bowl at the top. The light came from above the bowl. I pointed at the lamp.

“Gourry, cut that.” immediately Gourry responded by flashing his sword.

Easily, the copper post was cut diagonally, and the lamp fell into a bush. Of course, something like this

can’t be done with average skill or an average sword. I looked back at the soldier.

“If we were aiming to kil the high priest, we could have cut you both down before you could even say a

word. That’s how we keep the story short. But, we’re not the ones you need to worry about. The one

who’s after the high priest is very strong. The high priest has many guards, but if the one coming after him

was at the same level of skil as them, it wouldn’t be necessary for us to come here. But if we hadn’t, Ryan

would surely be killed. So. What wil you do?”

“I-I understand…” observing Gourry’s technique and listening to my words, the soldier repeatedly nodded

up and down. “B-But… I’l go with you.”

“Do as you please. Wel , shal we go?” with that, we left the mercenary, and Gourry and I were guided into

the temple by the soldier. Looking around I could see other soldiers but unlike before, I couldn’t see any

priests mixed in with them.

“There aren’t any priests…”

“It’s dinner time. Right now High Priest Ryan is in his personal room while all the other priests should be in the dining hal having a meal.” The soldier overheard me and explained. Now that I thhink about, it is

around that time. That means…

“Hurry!”

“Huh? Uhh…”

At my command we all picked up speed until we arrived at the high priest’s room. Throwing the door open

wide, there were mercenaries and soldiers in front of us. There were five other people, plus the high priest

Ryan. The high priest was in the midst of bringing his fork to his mouth.

“Wh-What is it? You two, aren’t you from the Sorcerer’s Guild…?”

“High Priest Ryan, someone’s after your life.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” At my anouncement, Ryan and his guards were in an uproar.

“Have you eaten any of that?”

“N-Not yet but… It can’t be–!” Shifting his focus to his fork, he tossed it away. “Poison?!” He shot a

panicked glance at the tray lined with different foods. Fried

white fish, steamed vegetable salad, bread

with soup. The high priest's fork had a section of fried fish on it.

"Let me check to make sure." I said as I took the tray. Making a puzzled face, I tried each food one by

one.

"Gourry, try this."

"Right." It was unusual for Gourry but he took a single bite. High Priest Ryan sat firmly with an anxious

look.

"Hmmm…" With the same troubled face, "Okay. You were lucky. There doesn't seem to be anything

abnormal about it."

Of course there didn't. We got here before Luke. He wouldn't have had time to slip poison into his meal. I

just had to say something vague to get some food. And don't tel me not to mess around. It's just more

depressing if you consider that humans' powers are weakened when they're hungry. If that happened, we

wouldn't be able to convince Luke to stop.

"But. It's dangerous to be in a room next to the courtyard. Someone could cast an attack spel from the

outside. We should move you to a larger room. If possible, a

room without windows, that doesn't face the

outside… a room with few obstacles would be best." At my words Ryan instantly rose from his chair.

"U-Understood! In that case, the dining hal ! Let's move to the dining hall!"

"Aren't the other priests in the middle of a meal?"

"We can just make them leave!" Ryan answered, clearly losing his self-control. "Let's go! Fol ow me,

gentlemen!" already neglecting their meals, the soldiers and mercenaries left the room in

succession. Gourry and I continued after them.

Before long we came to a spacious room with a large table at the center. With a voice like a crane, he

drove out the other priests who were in the middle of their meal and ordered for the guards to straighten

the table. Without explaining things very wel to the priests, they al seemed irritated. Of course, that didn't concern Ryan. Wel , when your life's in danger, there's not real y time to notice the people around you.

Once the room was tidied up, High Priest Ryan sat in a chair at the center, and breathed a single sigh.

"Now. You said that someone was after my life… Why?! What is the meaning of this?! I knew it! The one

behind this is one of the other high priests! Which one?! The same one who murdered our head priest and

Brahn?! How many more is he going to kil ?! If he's going to keep kil ing, why are we sitting in a place like

this?! Shouldn't we run?! No, maybe we should cal for more soldiers! No, now that I think about it, I heard

the fire was started from outside, but– Don't tel me these events are related?!"

"Calm down. First, listen to me. Second, don't ask any more questions." Somehow I managed to calm him

down after he snarled all these questions at me. Honestly, I was puzzled. I wondered if it was okay to tell

him that Luke was the one coming after him. If I told him everything that's happened, Ryan would suspect

that Luke was doing this because Kereth was behind everything that's happened. But if I don't tel him, he

won't know why he's being targeted.

"The head priest and High Priest Brahn were killed by separate people." I said. "The one who's targeting

you has a personal grudge."

"P-Personal Grudge?! That's preposterous! I haven't done anything to get on anyone's bad side!" To say

something so brazenly, without any self-awareness.

You…! I automatically raised my hand and–

SMACK!

“Kbah!” He took a fist directly to the face and fel from his chair.

“High Priest!”

“What are you doing, bastard?!”

Receiving the criticism from the guards–

“I went easy on you. You can shut up and take something like this.” The one who said that wasn’t me, but

Gourry. He delivered that line, no longer able to suppress his anger.

“Wha..?! Why would you…?!” Ryan said as he clutched his face. I looked down at him.

“Two or three days ago, someone stopped by requesting an antidote, but you refused to offer a cure. Your

reason was because he had been hired by High Priest Kereth. The girl who had been poisoned– couldn’t

be saved. And she was very important to him. What I’m saying is, if you’ve got any complaints you’l have

to revive her. And since you have absolutely no self-awareness, I mean… Your actions have made you an

indirect murderer.”

At that, the mercenaries and the soldiers turned threatening glares toward High Priest Ryan.

“Wh… that’s…! Murder…?! D-Don’t joke about that! How rude! F-For one thing, I… I don’t know anything

about that!”

“The guard in charge of the door clearly gave your name. ‘High Priest Ryan said so”

“Th-That’s…! F-First of al ! I’m not the one who poisoned the girl! If he wants to target someone he should

target who ever dealt the poison!”

“He already kil ed him.” with the way I said it, without any

delay, this time, Ryan was at a loss for words,

frozen.

“Do you know about the fire that happened nearby? That’s where he killed him. He slowly sliced up his

body, while he was stil alive, and then left him to the flames.” Ryan’s knees trembled in fear. This wil be a good lesson for him.

“B-But–!” He said with a look as if he was relying on me. “That means…! We’re only facing one man! Not

the people who killed Brahn! If that’s how it is…! As long as I have these guards here, al I have to fear is–

”

“The guys who kil ed Brahn or started the fire that kil ed the Head priest. I wonder who’s stronger…”

“Hee–!” He gulped a little.

“Th-They’ll probably… protect me… Of course! I-I… I have a promise with God to bear this city’s burdens!

Not yet… I can’t die yet! You’l protect me, won’t you? Won’t you?!”

“I don’t know about God, but if I promised anything like that I’m either not aware of it, or I was half asleep.”

I said. “I have no obligation to protect people like you.”

“Th-That’s…”

“However. I want to stop the man who’s running wild. From the

bottom of my heart. In order to do that, as

a result, I'll protect you."

"A-Anything's fine! Anyway, please save me! I-I'm begging you! I'm sincerely begging you!"

"Then be obedient. And patient."

"U-Understood!"

This old man… I wonder if he real y can stay obedient like this…

The structure of this building should be the same as the other branches. And Luke was a guard at the

north temple. In that case we should consider that Luke is familiar with the building's structure. But to be

honest, between Gourry and I, when it comes to the building's structures and the relation between its

locations, we really don't have any understanding. If Ryan were to carelessly move around, Luke would

have the advantage in finding him. So the problem is… which direction is Luke going to come from? The

room had no windows, and two exits, which were a good distance away from where Ryan was seated. But

that didn't mean anything at the east temple. If we were in another room, Ryan would have to be seated

away from the walls. Previously, our actions were delayed by

the abrupt attack, but he won't be able to

use that Dark Mist trick more than once. So if Luke wanted tc attack suddenly, there were only one or two

directions he could come from. That is– from above, or below.

"Is there a basement beneath this room?"

"…? No, the basement is a little further away… Would it be better if we moved there?"

"What about above this room?" I ignored him and asked my next question.

"Uh… wel … That's the priests sleeping quarters but… That's it! The enemy's coming from above or

below! That's how it is! Right! We'l have guards stationed in the room above! Hey! You, over there! Go

out into the courtyard and find five or six men who don't look like they're doing anything and move them to

the room above! That's the priest's sleeping quarters– from room five to room seven! Got that?!"

One of the nearby soldiers received Ryan's orders and left the room. And then, there was a time of

silence. All we could do is wait until Luke arrived. It felt like the time was long in a cruel way. It's like… he was late. Now, we weren't particularly looking forward to the moment where Luke would come in and kil

the high priest, but from the way he acted back in the east, he should have come directly here. But oddly,

too much time had passed. Or– there was the chance that he had already invaded the building.

“I-Is there real y… someone coming for me…?!” No longer able to endure the silence and the suspense,

Ryan leaked out an anxious question. “Is there some kind of mistake…? Maybe, it seemed like he was

targeting me, but he real y went after Francis in the east…”

“If that’s what you think, then shouldn’t your guards take care of al this?”

“O-Oh no, no! That would be a problem!” he quickly shook his head.

“Then…” I cut off my sentence. The sound of footsteps drawing near echoed in the hall.

“H-He’s here!?” Ryan cried out in fear and the guards became excited. But…

“High Priest Ryan!” a single gasping priest came running into the room.

“What is it?!” Ryan automatical y stood up from his chair, and the priest stumbled into a kneel.

“An emergency! Just now, there was a messenger from the east temple! A villain invaded the temple and

murdered High Priest Francis!”

“What?!” Ryan cried out in shock.

“We know.” At my words, the whole room froze. “High Priest Francis was killed right in front of our eyes.

And then, the one who did it told us clearly which high priest would be next. *This time will be South*. That’s what he said. That’s why we came here.”

“Th-That’s…! Then…!” He was trying to say something when…

There was a distant vibration and several voices echoing from somewhere.

“Wh-What the–?!”

“Out in the courtyard!” One of the guards reported from the hal way.

“E-Ehhh?! Take all of the guards and–”

“Stop!” I kept Ryan from reflexively handing down orders.

“Wha…?”

“It’s probably a diversion! He caused a disturbance out in the courtyard to pul attention and manpower

from here. He would then strike while we’re short-handed!”

“B-But… we’re only facing one man!”

“There are a number of ways he could do it! For instance, he could create a golem and let it rampage! At

any rate, we can't act carelessly!"

"Bingo. It was a golem. As expected, you properly predicted it."

Hearing his voice, I automatical y shivered. He hadn't said anything til now. That voice was…

"Who's there– ugh?!" From the hal way we could hear a guard's voice, and then without even a pause, a

groan. Then, from one of the entrances, he appeared.

…Luke…

"Yo. You're High Priest Ryan, right? I've come to kil you."

***

A shadow went running through the room.

Gourry!

All at once, Gourry drew his sword, readied it against Luke, and shortened the distance between them,

blocking Luke's path. He's good! Luke had only just appeared from the hal way. From his location it would

be impossible to enter the room and avoid Gourry.

"This is the end of the line!"

"I knew you'd come… This is… kind of a pain. I didn't want to deal with you two…" He said as he readied

his sword, and confronted Gourry. "In a fair, sword on sword

fight, I don’t have a chance against you,

huh?” He gave a self-deprecating smile.

“Heeee!” I stood in front of Ryan as he screamed out.

“I’m not gonna say something cheap, like I know what you’re feeling, but! I’m not going to abandon you to

do rash things like this!”

“Sorry… I’m causing a lot of trouble for you guys… but… don’t stop me…” Luke said as he turned his

gaze toward Gourry.

Luke should know. By sword skil s, he couldn’t win to Gourry. Not just in skil . Each sword was high

quality, but the ways in which they were lethal was different. Luke’s sword could temporarily store a spel ,

which was an interesting feature for a magic sword that was sharp on its own.

The other– In Gourry’s hands was a sword of legend, the Blast Sword. Original y, this was a sword that

cut through everything indiscriminately, so we deliberately had to put a spel on it to dul the blade. That’s how sharp that sword is.

If the two swords clashed, there’s no mistake that Luke’s sword would get cut in two. Luke should also

know that, but he didn’t show any sign of backing down. Even if he wasn’t successful, either he didn’t

intend on lowering his willpower, or he had some kind of plan.

“Let’s go!” Luke roared and drew his sword back. Gourry responded by brandishing his own sword. At that

instant two streaks flashed and crossed over each other.

Fwoom!

The wind howled and Gourry’s sword wavered. Did Luke have a wind spel wrapped around his blade? If

Gourry used his usual sword skills he could have torn the coiled gale apart. Of course, Gourry was only

trying to stop Luke so his skill lacked its usual sharpness.

“–ck!”

But Gourry just struck again using the momentum of his previous swing. His target was the sword in

Luke’s hands.

Fwoom!

Once again, the wind howled, but Gourry continued dealing out blows. Luke stepped forward. Maintaining

the distance, Gourry retreated back.

–No! I realized something in my astonishment. Gourry’s skil s hadn’t dul ed. The power of the wind around

Luke’s blade wasn’t normal. Otherwise Gourry should have swung his sword not once, but twice. From

here I could tel that Gourry wasn't using his sword to attack, but giving al of his attention to defense. In that case– predicting his next move I began casting a spell in my mouth.

More than being only able to retreat, Gourry had struck three or four times with his sword, which Luke had

caught every time. With Gourry's skil , he was capable of reading the direction of the wind wrapped

around the sword, slipping through, and attacking the actual body of the sword. But that was with an

average opponent. Luke couldn't compare to Gourry, but by no means was he average. If he persisted in

protecting, the wind that wrapped around Luke's sword would catch Gourry's sword. Once again, I saw it

and of course—

After several times, Luke's wind seized Gourry's sword.

"Burst!" Luke roared.

FWOOSSHH!

The gust stored inside the sword blew out all at once.

"–!"

If it hit him directly he would have completely lost his balance. All he could do was jump back, riding the

wind. At the same time, Luke kicked the ground. The moment Gourry opened the distance between them,

Luke withdrew from the space, and approached Ryan, as he had planned. But I was already expecting

that! Without delay I released my spell.

“Diem Wing!”

I released my gale against Gourry’s back and stopped him from retreating back. Once again, the distance

between them was restored.

“What?!” Luke’s surprised voice–

“Ohhhh!” And Gourry’s heavy war cry.

A sharp sound rang out and Luke’s sword went tumbling to the floor. It hadn’t been knocked away.

Knowing that Gourry’s Blast Sword would cut right through his own blade the instant they met, Luke had

let go of his sword. Though, striking from an imperfect stance, Gourry’s attack wouldn’t have cut Luke’s

sword very well.

“Ch!” seeing his disadvantage, Luke retreated to the hal way.

We can’t afford to let him run away! If he runs now, he could come back and target Ryan again and all this

would be meaningless. If we can’t completely cut through his hatred– I don’t know what we should do. But

we need to talk to him at least a little.

“Gourry! Fol ow him!” I yel ed as I dashed after Luke. Kicking the ground, Gourry headed out into the

hallway.

Luke went rushing down the hall when darkness started to spread. Dark mist! Reflexively, Gourry stopped

in his tracks. And suddenly–

As we headed toward the darkness, flames crept up around the ceiling.

“Uwaaahh!” the guards cried out in shock, but the flames only licked the ceiling. He probably saw that we

were heading toward the Dark Mist and released a series of fire spells to restrain our movements. But I

won’t falter over something like this! Without paying it any mind, I plunged into the darkness that spread

through the hall. I hadn’t even gone a few steps when I reemerged into the hal way. I stopped

automatically. Here and there along the walls of the corridor were sconces with magic light. But just a little further, the blackness of the Dark Mist spell spread once again.

“Lina!” A moment late, Gourry appeared from within the darkness. We looked at each other, nodded, and

continued running again. We entered the second black fog– and there was a third right ahead of us.

Urgh! So persistent! Without slowing down, we broke through the third darkness. Before us was a

crossroad. In the hallway straight ahead was a fourth darkness. Doubt flitted through my head.

“Stop!” I cried as a stopped myself. A Dark Mist shel game… Up until the second time, it was obvious. But

by the third time, Luke already knew we’d see through it. And the fourth time– was developed around this

crossroad specifical y. Of course that doesn’t mean he ran that way. If he seriously thought casting a Dark

Mist spel at a crossroads would shake us, it’s needless to say, going to the side would be most effective

for him. Nevertheless, it’s this kind of thing where he’s either misleading us, or he’s outsmarting us by

making us think he’s misleading us and he did run that way, or… it can’t be!

“We’re going back Gourry!” I said as I turned and ran back into the darkness.

“Right!” He answered and fol owed after me. We went back running through the same number of dark

masses.

“Uwaaahhh!” As we suddenly emerged, the guards cried out in surprise.

“Get a hold of yourselves!” I scolded them and quickly surveyed the room. The chair at the center of the

room had no one in it.

“Where’s the high priest?!”

“H-He took some of the guards with him and ran the other way.” One of the guards answered me.

—*Shit!*

I didn’t realize Luke’s plan until I final y got here! Those flames near the ceiling weren’t for the sake of

blocking Gourry and I’s movements. It was to smoke Ryan out of the room. His simultaneous retreat was

to lure Gourry and I away. So then while we were puzzling over his Dark Mist tricks, he took a different

path and got ahead of us so he could target Ryan directly. The reason it took him so long to get here from

the Eastern branch was probably because if we had time to explain the situation to Ryan it would magnify

his fear. Gourry and I dashed through the room and headed toward the other exit. Just as we did–

Crash!

At the edge of the path we were heading for, the ceiling collapsed with a roar.

“I-It’s al over!” Ryan’s scream was layered over a crushing

sound.

This is bad!

The two of us took off into the passage anyway. The dust hadn't settled but this wasn't a time where we

could worry about that. We tread over the piles of rubble that stretched on forever. Ryan's guards had

been following him. Around us, there were four or five mercenaries and soldiers lying on the ground. But

Luke and Ryan weren't around.

Where are they?! If I searched for a presence, in a far off place, I could hear a commotion of people and

the sound of a fight. There? No, wrong, that's the courtyard–

"…ahh…." Mixed in with the distant commotion, there was the distant, unmistakable voice of High Priest

Ryan.

"Over here!" Gourry said and went running. I fol owed after him. Leaving the hal way and turning around a

corner, we headed toward the rear garden. Normally there would be soldiers on guard around here but,

they must have already run out to the courtyard because I couldn't see any. We ran down another

hallway. Bam! I practically rammed into the partially open door. There, the stillness of night governed the

space. There were garden lamps here and there tossing a gentle magic light over the area. Pruned,

thoroughly maintained greenery. Bronze statues which had been transformed into shadows. From the

direction of the courtyard, I could still hear the sounds of a battle. As I thought, most of the guards had

gathered there. Here, they were already a number of bodies collapsed on the ground, with Luke standing

silently in the middle of it all.

“I real y don’t understand…” Luke spoke silently. Footprints led up to a black mass– looking down at High

Priest Ryan.

…gh!

“Humans… There was a time when I thought if they did things recklessly, stubbornly…. then they’d die

easily…”

We couldn’t stop him.

I ground my back molars.

“Fighting Mazoku… How many times did I think we absolutely couldn’t do it…? But on that journey…

somehow, we survived… we won… That should have… Zord, some second rate bastard… Milina… I

can’t believe it… I actual y… it’s so weird… real y…”

“…Luke…”

“This guy died easily too… his screaming was so annoying… I severed his vocal chords. If I avoided the

blood vessels, he wouldn’t die, but… it happened so suddenly… from shock. This guy… I was planning on

real y tormenting him…”

“Luke…”

“It’s no good… It’s stil no good…”

“…what?” Luke’s words sent a cold chil down my back. Lurking within him, it felt like the hatred stil hadn’t dissipated.

“If I kil him it wil all be over. Everything wil come to an end… after that happens, they can arrest me or

k i l me, I don’t care… anything’s fine… Milina’s not here anymore anyway… That’s what I thought but…

that’s not right… after that, and after that…they keep bursting out from within my heart… those black

words. …Fil ing my chest…! Stil … Kereth and his priests, just had to use one more spel …! They could

have just used Resurrection but they said Milina couldn’t be saved…!”

“Luke!” I yel ed out.

Certainly Kereth and his healers weren’t able to completely

remove the poison from Milina. There was no

one there who could use Resurrection. But more than Zord using a poison that an average antidote spell

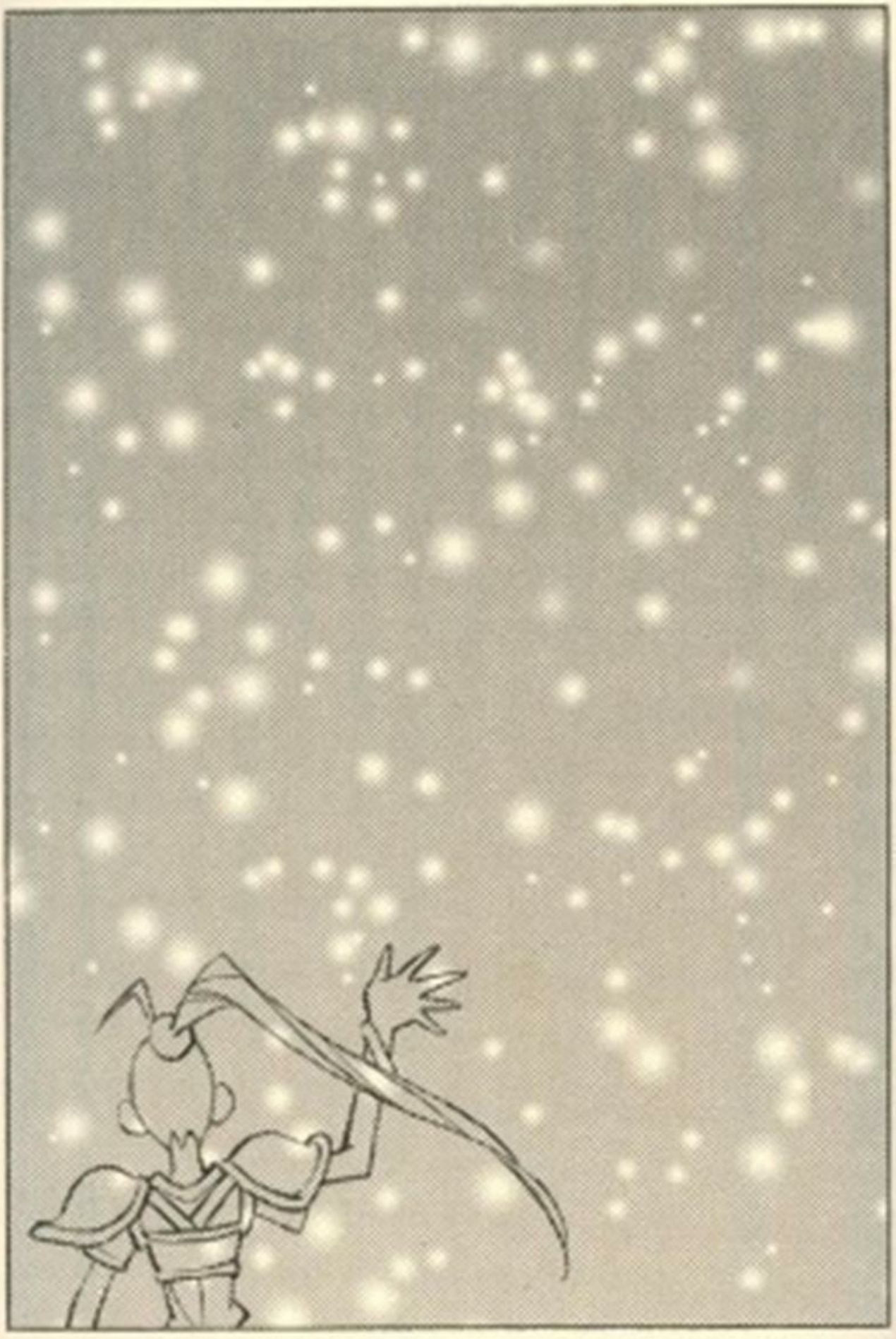
couldn't cure, by the time we got to the north temple the poison had circulated through Milina's body, and

her strength was exhausted. Certainly, if they had been able to remove all of the poison, she might have

recovered. If someone had been there who could use Resurrection, a spell that heals by gradually

drawing energy from others in the area, her health would have gone back to normal and her body could

have fought the rest of the poison, and she might have won. But that's…



“I know! I’m taking my rage out on them! That this is just an excuse! In my mind I know al that! Still…!

Still, my heart must…! You don’t understand!”

“It *is* just an excuse, Luke!”

“Next will be the north temple…”

Gourry’s word’s couldn’t reach Luke’s heart.

“Stop it, Luke! If you continue this way, the hate that you feel in your heart wil just continue to spread!

Once you kill Kereth… next you’l start to blame us. And if you kil us, then you’l blame someone else

after that. And then in the very end, you’l only have yourself to blame! If you abandon yourself to your

hatred, if you wipe out this city, it won’t fil your heart!”

“Then… what would you do? All you’re doing is saying to get a hold of my emotions but… what would you

do if you were in the same position…? What would you do if your own companion was kil ed by some

jackass? If you were told to cast aside your hate, would you cast it aside? If you were told to stop because

it was all in vain, would you understand and just stop?”

“. . . . . .”

I didn’t have an answer for Luke’s question.

Slowly.

Luke turned around.

“It’l be over… Next, it wil al be over…!”

“Luke!” When I called out–

He released his spell and his voice spread away. And then, Luke took off into the air. To the North, to

High Priest Kereth.

FOUR: The Darkness Concealed Within Everyone.

“…So he’s coming…” High Priest Kereth said with a dark expression after he had finished listening to my

story.

「――来るのですか――彼が――」
あたしの話を聞き終えて――
ケレス大神官は、暗いまなざしで
つぶやいた。

We were at the shrine of Aqualord, in Kereth's personal room. This was after Luke had left the south

temple. There was still a commotion out in the courtyard, but we left that to the actual soldiers while

Gourry and I chased after—no, tried to chase after Luke. However, even using Boost with a flight spell, we

couldn't see where Luke was at al . Not being able to help that, we came directly to this temple and

explained the situation to High Priest Kereth, including the part where Kereth was being targeted.

"He's… running wild… but at the same time, something's holding him back. To exemplify that, he left

before us, but he stil hasn't arrived. But at any cost, we'l stop him."

"Understood." Kereth nodded up and down. "I wil also do whatever I can to help out."

"Please do." I said and lowered my head. "Then, for the place we'll be guarding you from–"

"About that, I have a request." He interrupted me. "I'd like for it to be in the chapel."

"The chapel…?" At his suggestion, I knit my eyebrows.

The most suitable place for bodyguarding would be somewhere where an assailant couldn't suddenly

attack, but would be easy to escape from. In addition, considering the possibility of a fight, a larger space

would be nice. I won't complain since the chapel is a large space, so at least we can gather guards there.

But… in the chapel there were a ton of pil ars and pews for the worshipers and altars and all sorts of other

obstacles. There were a lot of places where someone could hide while approaching us. Or someone could

attack by smashing through the stained glass on the ceiling. In short, it was hard to say if this was a

suitable place or not.

"Hmm…" I made a difficult face and Kereth immediately looked straight at me.

"Please. I feel like that's the place where I belong… whatever result comes of it…" Those are the words of

a man who has resigned himself to death. Going so far as to say that, he was no longer opposed to it.

"…Understood." I said without a nod of agreement. "Then, for the guards–"

"About that too… I have a suggestion." Once again, he interrupted. And of course, his idea was

unconventional.

***

The walls and pillars were outfitted with sconces forged with the image of a maiden and lit with bright

magical light which illuminated the wide space. Between the rows of pews stretched an indigo carpet with

an emerald green pattern woven into it. Centered at the end of a wide aisle was an altar to Aqualord. At

that altar was positioned High Priest Kereth. Supporting him on both sides was Gourry, on the right, and I

on the left. We were the only ones in the chapel. The other soldiers and mercenaries were elsewhere

within the branch.

Gourry and I were the only guards.

That was High Priest Kereth's ridiculous idea that he was so confident in. Of course, I was against it. We

would be way too defenseless. But that's what he said, that this was something we needed to settle on

our own, that we didn't need to get the mercenaries involved. Wel , that's for sure. It's a bit harsh to say,

but even if we had a mountain of soldiers and mercenaries, I don't think they could stop Luke. No, apart

from that, if any of them approached Luke to reprimand him, he'd snatch away any chance for discussion.

So even the preferred method wasn't very good. Eventual y

Gourry and I agreed to his plan. But of

course, the mercenaries, regular soldiers, and priests didn't. So we lied to them saying that Kereth would

be giving an admonitory speech and gathered them all in an inner room. With my Sleeping spell we put

them all to bed. This way, if we make a little noise, we shouldn't be bothered.

"Understand, Gourry?"

"Yeah… if he doesn't back down… get serious. I guess…" At my question, Gourry nodded with a hard

expression.

Until now, compared to High Priests Francis and Ryan, the two of us had been more sympathetic to Luke,

who we were closer with. But this time, things were different. That's why, even if we have to hurt Luke, we

need to stop him. Thinking back to the showdown with Luke in the south, though unintentional y, we didn't

hurt our opponent, and our opponent didn't hurt us. Those were the conditions of the fight. As a result…

High Priest Ryan was kil ed. That's why this time…

"We'l stop him. Absolutely." I whispered.

Then, just as if we were waiting for it, the sound of footsteps echoed. Distant… and somehow near. With a

heavy sound, the chapel doors opened.

“Hey. I guess I made you wait.” he said, il uminated by the glow of the magic lights, with that quiet,

unchanging expression.

Luke.

“On the way here, I had to go back south and pick up my sword. But this is a pretty tasteful reception from

you guys.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but no unnecessary burdens will be entering.”

“Yeah… that’s fine…”

“So… you won’t stop?”

“That’s my intent. This is where it ends.”

“Luke…” I said with a sigh. “What… did Milina say to you?”

“–gh!” Luke averted his eyes and bit his lip.

“After we left the room… when it was just the two of you… What did she say? Milina, to you. Did she tell

you to avenge her? Did she tel you to kil the priests? Or…?”

“What Milina said is none of your business!” he interrupted me. It was practical y a scream.

“You…! What the hel do you know about what I’m going through?! How can you even understand…?!

This is my problem!”

…*Haaahhhh*… Luke took a deep sigh.

“It doesn’t matter what I say. Let’s keep this simple. The point is whether or not you guys can stop me.”

“I know.” I nodded.

There was no other way. I knew this was all a mistake. Luke knew that too. He just couldn’t stop the

hatred that was coming from deep within his heart. That’s why there was probably only one method for

doing this– Gourry and I had to stop him.

“This time… we’re going to stop you. We won’t hold back.” I said with a wry smile.

“I know. Me too. Depending on how things go, I might have one or two things to match your skil s.” Luke

returned a wry smile and drew his sword. And so, illuminated by the magic lights, under the watch of the

saints in the stained glass, Luke confronted us.

***

Luke kicked the floor, running swiftly between the benches, he was coming right toward us.

Amazingly, as if he was protecting Kereth, Gourry jumped out in front of the altar and drew his sword. I

began reciting a spell. Luke was closing in on us.

“Abyss Flare!” Luke released a spel that I didn’t even know. In that instant, fwoom! The carpet right in

front of us was set ablaze. Concealing Luke’s form as he proceeded toward us, the flames licked at the

carpet. Gourry had his sword prepared in front of him, but I had anticipated that Luke would use some

kind of spell as a diversion.

“Diem Wing!” I released my strong wind spel toward the flames that were approaching. But the flames

didn’t disperse. Magic Fire?! Predicting that I would counte with a wind spell, he used a fire spell that I

couldn’t defend against. Wel , in that case…!

“Gourry! Cut it!”

“Right!”

Usually that would be an unreasonable demand, but in response to my request, Gourry slashed through

the convulsing flames with his sword, dividing the fire and sending it scattering away. The Blast Sword is

also a sword that can cut through magic, so it should be able to cut through magic fire. That’s what I was

thinking. But at the same time that he cut them down, Luke came dashing out from within the blaze as it

vanished. With the sword in his right hand, he slashed downward at Gourry.

“–gh!” turning his sword, Gourry caught it. Instantly, the space in front of his sword blurred. Once again, a

gale had wrapped around his blade. However!

“Ohhh!” With a battlecry, Luke’s sword was cut in two. Seeing through the invisible wind, Gourry sent out

a strike that cut through the sword. He did it! Or so I thought. Luke’s left hand moved and another sword

appeared.

“Burst!” with Luke’s voice, the wind wrapped around that sword was released.

“–gh!” Gourry’s body was set adrift by the wind. Without paying it any mind, Luke tossed away the sword

in his right hand and headed for the altar. Toward Kereth!

But I’m stil here! I ran toward the high priest, grabbed his hand and pul ed him toward me while casting

my spell. Kicking off the altar, Luke jumped through the air toward us. Just then, Gourry had corrected his

stance and forced his way through.

“Diem Wing!” Luke released his gust downward.

“–?!”

The wind caused Gourry to stagger and changed the course of

Luke’s drop. As he landed, he drew a

black dagger from his lower back. Driving it towards Gourry–

“Darkness, embrace!” A black fog appeared around where Gourry was. Dark Mist?! He could do it with his

second sword, and he could do it with this dagger. There’s no mistake, Luke knew how to store spel s

within weapons. He can do that?! Previously, Luke lived in the underworld. That’s what he said. Is that

when he learned these techniques?

Gourry reflexively jumped back, opening the distance between them. In that interval, Luke came plunging

toward me.

“Ray Wing!” I released my spel and High Priest Kereth and I went whirling into the air wrapped in a barrier

of wind. I used my talismans to cast a Boost spel . This way, the wind barrier that surrounded us couldn’t

be worn out by something light. It was a hard spell to control, but this chapel was a big enough space that

we could fly around in it. I temporarily flew to the back of the chapel then made a u-turn. Now I was

heading straight for Luke, and I could strike him head on! Luke didn’t dodge it. He only returned his sword

to its scabbard and held out his free left hand. Don’t tel me he’s

going to try and tear through our barrier?!

Or is he just bluffing?!

I'm gonna go with bluffing.

Without paying him any mind, I continued plunging straight toward Luke. But the moment we made

contact, Luke's mouth moved and the wind warped.

Wha…?!

The encircling wind barrier fluctuated, there was a furious disruption all around us, and it was torn apart.

Losing our barrier, the high priest and I tumbled to the floor. However, Luke was also blown away by the

collision.

I get it! I figured out what the hell Luke had just done. The moment he made contact with the barrier with

his left hand, he cast some kind of wind spell. Used against the wind barrier, the two spells interfered with

each other. The power of the interference was much stronger on my side because I had cast Boost. But

since the spell was already difficult to control, that interference combined with an unstable spell– in other

words, when it was hit with Luke's spel , the barrier's balance crumbled and the spel broke down. By

understanding the spel 's unique characteristics, he was able to

tear through the barrier. Of course he

could do something like that! But somehow Kereth and I were able to come out of it still standing –er,

landing. With the shock from the crash, my body hurt al over, but I didn't have time to just by lying around

in pain. Luke who had been temporarily blown away, was already standing again. There, Gourry plunged

at him from behind.

"Stop being so bitter!" Gourry yelled and flashed his sword.

"I'm not bitter!" Luke yelled drawing another dagger, releasing the wind spel stored inside it's blade. Was

he going to blow Gourry away again?! But, in the middle of his full power charge, Gourry jumped to the

side and avoided the wind that rushed toward him. Luke threw his dagger, aiming for the spot where

Gourry would land. Of course he couldn't avoid that. Gourry had no other choice but to repel the dagger

with his sword. At that moment Luke went into a two-handed spring toward Gourry.

"What?!" For a moment, Gourry faltered. If this had been an enemy he needed to defeat, there's no doubt

he would have bisected him in midair. But Luke was an opponent he only needed to stop. That moment of

hesitation delayed his reaction time.

“–gh!”

Luke’s feet sunk into Gourry’s gut. Gourry staggered. Luke landed. Without even looking at Gourry, Luke

turned and dashed toward us. I didn’t have time to cast a spel . Could my swordsmanship stop Luke?

The answer was no.

There was only one method we could use.

“Over here!” I said as I pul ed Kereth’s hand and went running. I cast a spel in my mouth. We were

heading for a corner of the chapel. Our movement was only to put some distance between us and Luke,

since we couldn’t just escape to the back of the room. Without hesitating, I ran down the aisle. This should

buy me some time to complete my spel , since we can’t just wait for Gourry to pursue Luke. Of course,

Luke followed after us, gradually closing the distance. Luke was casting some kind of spell– But mine was

completed before his. Placing one hand against the wall, I released my spell.

“Van Rail!”

With my hand as its starting point, frozen ivy crept along the wall. This way, if the opponent came in

contact with it, they'd be frozen in place. He couldn't avoid being frostbitten. As the ice drew near his feet, Luke jumped.

"Ray Wing!" Luke cast the high-speed flight spell in midair. Since the ice missed Luke, it continued along

the wal toward Gourry. Of course, Gourry wouldn't eat something like this directly.

"Hah!" brandishing the Blast Sword, Gourry was able to scatter the ice entirely. And so Luke came after

us, ready to strike from behind. We couldn't endure a hit like that! I immediately dropped to the floor,

pulling High Priest Kereth down with me. This way, Luke would pass over our heads and charge down the

aisle alone– at least he should have. I was a little late pulling Kereth down and his ceremonial robes got

caught in the wind barrier, dragging him along. And of course since he was holding onto me, I went with

him.

"Waaaagh!?"

We were dragged like that all the way to the exit. Of course, this was a miscalculation for Luke too. There

were now two extra people being dragged along by a spell that was already unstable. Just as we left the

aisle, the spell lost balance and we crashed. At that time, I grabbed Kereth's hand and went running down

the side corridor. I could feel Luke's presence fol owing behind us. While chanting a spel , I found a

narrow pathway and changed course. He was able to avoid my Van Rail by flying over it, so then how's

this?! I released a spell behind us.

"Freeze Brid!" The cold spel I released, crashed into the wal behind us and left more than half of the

passageway encased in ice. That should stop him! In that time, Gourry should be able to follow– I looked

over my shoulder.

Instantly. Along with a sharp sound, some of the ice I had formed was cracking and falling to the ground.

Are you kidding?! He can cut through ice?! As if he was barely turning a regular-sized sword, he must

have cut a mass of ice from the narrow path or– Did he have a sword charged with a fire spell already

prepared?! But while he was wielding his sword, Gourry approached him from behind.

"Luuuuuke!"

Looking back, Luke kicked some chunks of ice near his feet toward Gourry. Even though he had cut it

apart, there was still a mass about the size of a fist among the pieces. If he got hit with something like

that, it wouldn't be fixed with just an apology. There was no way to avoid it in the narrow path. Gourry

gave the sword a small swing, but only knocked down the large mass of ice. That instant– Ice started to

spread from the core of Gourry's Blast Sword.

"!!!"

He hurriedly dropped his sword. From the handle to the blade it was completely covered in ice. If Gourry

had let go of it a moment later, his hands would have been frozen. What Luke did just now– I honestly

have no idea what it was. He kicked some ice, including a large piece, and somehow combined it with a

Freeze Brid spel … Anyway, this way, Gourry lost his weapon. And I don't think Luke was going to wait for

it to thaw.

And then, Luke kicked the ground, aiming for Gourry! Had he already been planning on preventing Gourry

from attacking? Throwing his sword and dagger to the ground, he challenged him to hand-to-hand

combat. From his dash, he threw a feint with his left fist, ducked down, and went for a palm strike directed

at the pit of the stomach. Gourry warped his body to avoid the left fist, then swept away the right attack

with his right hand, stepping forward and countering with his right elbow. But Luke, while turning his body,

grabbed Gourry's right wrist with his right hand and then went to sweep out his right leg. Wrapping around

Gourry, he could take him down by collapsing backward onto him, at least that was the position he was

taking. But that moment, Gourry sunk his left fist into Luke's back.

"gh!?" Gourry was somehow able to strike from such an unstable position. It wasn't very effective, but

Luke had lost his balance. Separating himself from Luke, Gourry threw a flying kick. Luke took the blow to

his side. That should be effective on its own! But– At that moment, Luke grabbed Gourry's leg with his left

arm.

"Raaahh!" As if he was repel ing it away, he forced his leg against the wal . "Ray Freeze!" The cold spell

left Gourry's leg covered in ice, clinging to the wal .

"–ck!!" a regretful groan leaked out. But by grabbing Gourry's

leg, the palm of Luke's own hand was also

frozen to the ice.

"OOORRRRAAAAAHHH!" And with a scream, he forcibl pulled them apart. There was an unpleasant

sound of tearing rawhide, and blood splattered over the area. The shape of a red hand print was left in the

ice. Without paying any mind to the skin that would be pulled from his hand, Luke had just torn it away.

"…how much…" beside me, High Priest Kereth murmured in terror.

How much… how much longer… Did that mean how long until he kil ed Kereth? Up until now his hatred

had been deep. Somber thoughts were growing in his heart. Luke turned around. Gourry couldn't move

from where he was. As Luke looked toward us, he pulled a dagger from his lower back.

Oh yeah?! In that case–!

"Flare Arrow!" I released my spel .

"Useless!" Luke shouted as he swung his dagger. He created a gale which blew against me and scattered

the flames I had released.

Bastard! How many magic charged weapons does he have?! If this is how it is, all we can do for now is

run! If we take some kind of detour we can return to where Gourry is once his leg thaws and we'l have

some cooperation! Once again, I grabbed High Priest Kereth's hand and pul ed– and fell forward. Kereth

didn't move. Huh?

If I looked back, he was standing tall right where he was, looking straight ahead at Luke.

…wh…?

Luke was also frozen by his unexpected response. High Priest Kereth walked casually from where he

was.

"–gh!" Luke reflexively readied the dagger in his right hand. And that moment Kereth grabbed his wrist–

and forced the point of the dagger toward his own chest.

"–?!"

We were all frozen still.

"Kil me." High Priest Kereth said in a cool-headed voice.

"Wha–?!"

"You wanted to kil me, didn't you?" At those words, bewilderment came to Luke's face.

"Wh…! You…! You think acting like this wil make me–"

"I don't think that." Kereth said. "You fought with Miss Lina

and Mr. Gourry, who should be your friends,

you gave yourself this wound… That's how much further you would go just to kil me."

"That's… true…" Luke said with a bitter expression and a groan.

"Then it's okay if you kil me." he said thoughtlessly. "Certainly I am also responsible for your beloved's

death. That's why… Please kil me. That way, the hate can completely disappear from your heart. Please

kil me. Real y, then this will al be over."

The color of hesitation came to Luke's face.

"Are you… okay with it?"

"I have no reason to be. It's not that I particularly want to die, it's just… if I were saved now, your hate

wouldn't vanish, you'd attack me again, you'd continue fighting with Miss Lina, and other people could get

involved. But more than all of that, while you're here in front of me, I've had enough of this. That's al ."

". . . . ." Luke was silent for a moment. And though we were right beside him, he was completely out of our

reach. Right now, Luke was hesitating. If we tactlessly interfered, it could stimulate his hatred. And if that happened, Kereth would surely lose his life. For a moment we were at a

standstill. And then, at that time, I

realized something.

“This place is–! Do you remember?” At my words, Luke scowled for a moment.

“–!” When he noticed he gasped a little. That’s right. This was… We were in front of the room where Milina

breathed her last.

Time froze.

No one moved. Not me. Not Luke. Not Kereth.

And then, I’m not sure if it was after a long time or a short time, but the stil ness ended.

“. . . . . .gh!” Biting his lip, Luke picked up his sword.

“Haaaahhhhhh…” Someone breathed a deep sigh.

I turned my eyes toward Luke. I tried to say his name. Without a word, Luke passed right by me and

Kereth and went running down the hall.

“Lu–!”

“Please don’t.” As I tried to cal after him, High Priest Kereth held me back. “…Just let him go…”

From the back, I watched Luke jump through one of the hall windows, into the dark of night, and

disappear.

“The assailant… was hit by one of Miss Lina’s spel s and blown apart without a trace… Is something like

that okay?” High Priest Kereth said as I watched Luke disappear into the darkness.

***

Thus, on the surface, this incident was over. The man who had killed two of the high priests was dead.

And when High Priest Kereth reported this, no one doubted him. It was still unknown who caused the fire

that killed the head priest previously, but more than the related people no longer being here, it was

already impossible to verify the real culprit, and so there was an unspoken agreement from practically

everyone that, at the end of the day, this was an unsolvable case. Francis and Ryan said they didn’t do it,

but I don’t know whether or not they were tel ing the truth. There’s a chance that Brahn, they first to die,

did it but… At any rate, there was no way to make sure. Some thought it was suspicious that Kereth was

the only one left alive, but since we knew the situation, from our perspective he wasn’t left alive just by

chance. Well, for the townspeople, they just wanted to quickly forget this scandalous event and let the

town return to the prosperous tourist city it once was. As for my commission fee, it had already been

settled. I didn't accept any. This time around… in the end, I couldn't do anything… And so, today arrived

before preparations could be made for the meeting to determine the next head priest. Two days had

passed since the incident. Rushing things along, the chief counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild and the city's

dignitaries made their decision. Of the four high priests, three had passed away and Kereth was the only

one left. In that case there was only one answer to who should be the next head priest. That's what you'd

probably think. Gathering for the meeting was the chief counselor, about ten of the city dignitaries, and

High Priest Kereth. Also, Gourry and I, as related parties to the incident, sat in as observers.

"Wel then, we shal later discuss the rebuilding of the burned-down main branch, but first, the one who

shall be appointed the next high priest…" Quickly going through the simple greetings, moderated by the

chief counselor, they got to the real issue. "Through various misfortunes, of the four high priests selected

by the late Head Priest Joshua, it seems there is only one remaining. In that case there is only one

answer. I believe High Priest Kereth shal be appointed the next head priest. How's that? Any objections?"

He turned his head, surveying the room. But there wasn't anyone there who objected– at least there

shouldn't have been.

"I have an objection."

"…?!" Everyone was shocked when they noticed who had spoken out. The one who said it, was none

other than High Priest Kereth himself.

"H-High Priest Kereth…! What do you mean by…?!"

"I… am regrettably inexperienced and powerless. Through this incident I was made to realize what pain

is." In contrast from the impatient chief counselor, he started speaking in a quiet, somehow sad tone. "At

the time when Head Priest Joshua died, when I heard the news, I went to the chapel to pray to god…. and

a voice came to my ears. The head priest was murdered. A wicked person desires to bring chaos to this

city. If you want to protect yourself, you need to gather power. I thought I had received a revelation from

god…" I started to feel like I heard that somewhere before. "And then… within the next few days, High

Priest Francis began to hire guards. I thought it was just as

prophesied, and so, I also hired a number of

guards. But… after al that, the situation was made even worse… two of the high priests were murdered

by someone I had hired. I can't say I'm not responsible."

"But that's…!"

"That's–" No matter what the chief counselor said, Kereth interrupted and continued on. "I… couldn't save

the girl who had been afflicted with poison and wished to be saved… And the cost of that was the man I

hired, killing two high priests. This was largely caused by my inexperience. The voice I heard that night

wasn't the voice of god, but a voice from within, the voice of my growing suspicions… Until then, I felt like

I was a fairly competent priest… But, I myself only turned out this way because of the late Head Priest

Joshua's abilities. I, during this one incident, showed my inexperience. And as inexperienced as I am, I

cannot serve as a replacement to the deceased Lord Joshua. For that reason– I humbly decline the

position of head priest."

At high priest Kereth's proclamation, the meeting room was wrapped in a great tumult.

***

The sun was leaning to the west, and without waiting much longer, the town was tainted with the color of

twilight. After all that, the discussion to decide who would be the next head priest was once again

postponed for a later date. Wel , that's just how things go. Beginning with the chief counselor and in the

minds of the dignitaries, the plan was that they'd decide on High Priest Kereth and then have a discussion

on how things would be operating from then on. They probably didn't think they were going to stumble on

the first step. With this, the rest of the conversation didn't go so smoothly. Wel , whoever was going to be

the head priest and however the temple was going to be managed, those were the city's problems now. It

is no longer under my supervision. *But.*

There was still just one thing. Before we left this city, there was one thing I wanted to be clear on. And

that's why I was here now with Gourry, at the main branch at the center of the city, where the burned

down chapel was. Black stoned stone pillars were supporting the high ceiling of an empty space. There

weren't any rows of pews, and practical y all of the stained glass had been melted away in the fire so that

you could no longer tell what they were depicting. Where the altar should have been was just a black,

burned, mass which is where I was crouching.

“Don’t you think it’s weird, Gourry?” My question echoed through the chapel.

“What is?”

“This incident isn’t over just yet. Who kil ed the head priest in the first place? Everything started here in

this main branch.”

“Who…? You’re asking me…?” Gourry said while scratching his head. Of course I didn’t even need to ask

him. I didn’t pay him any mind and continued.

“Francis of the west temple said that he had heard the voice of god. I thought he was just talking crazy,

but then High Priest Ryan of the south said he had been chosen by god. I also thought that was just self-

absorbed crap. But today… Kereth said it. He heard the voice of god. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“Wel … For everyone to say they heard the voice of god… it’s definitely not normal but…”

“If it had just been one or two people, you could think that it was just an auditory hallucination caused by

the shock of the head priest’s death but… when Kereth turned

down the head priest position, it was just

too much. Wel , maybe if we had met High Priest Brahn of the west, he might've said he heard the voice

too." I said as looked far into the distance. The western sky was peeking in through the burned stained

glass. Evening was approaching. "If you think of it like that… wouldn't it be fitting if they real y did hear a voice?"

"Wel … I wonder…"

"Look, Gourry. If you heard the voice of someone you real y didn't know coming from somewhere… You

would know that the voice was coming from someone, right?"

"I don't think I'd know something like that."

"I guess not…"

"What are you trying to say, Lina?"

"Basical y–" I said as I raised a finger. "The high priests shouldn't have heard the voice of god. But, the

high priests have always believed in god. When they lost their spiritual support from the head priest and

prayed, they heard a voice giving them advice, and they *assumed* it was the voice of god. From the

stories, the voice never said itself that it was god. All it said was that the head priest's death wasn't an

accident, but a murder, and the culprit wanted to throw the city

into chaos."

The one who the priests had been acquainted with was someone who was really good about saying

things like this. It wasn't a complete lie, but I can't say it would be easy to figure out what was the exact

truth. Saying things so that they would be easily misleading, and guiding people in the wrong direction,

that's the kind of guy this is. If this 'voice' belonged to someone like that…

"People, just by hearing it, wouldn't have the power to recognize if it was the voice of god or someone

else. And so with this situation and my own experience, I can make some kind of guess. Well, what was

this voice really then? The voice knew that the head priest had been killed, but at that point in time the

investigation wasn't very thorough and they couldn't say if it was accidental or a murder. If it knew that the death wasn't an accident… it could be an omniscient, omnipotent god, and if not…"

"…I get it…" Gourry final y nodded. "If not, then it was the real kil er…"

"That's right." I nodded and looked to the heavens. "Did you hear that?! You can come out now!" My voice

echoed through the chapel. "Or are you admitting that you can attack people in their sleep, indoctrinate

them with nonsense in their time of confusion, but you don't have the power to fight them directly?" Once

the reverberation of my voice disappeared–

"k… k-k-k….. k-k-k-k…" A quiet chuckle replaced the stil ness.

Just as I thought… it was here.

Back when Gourry and I first visited the temple, Gourry felt someone's presence and chased after it, but

the presence suddenly disappeared. If that wasn't just his imagination, our enemy was…

"You're quite perceptive… It's true I did kil the old man, and for the others, I gave them a little bit of

advice…" The voice resounded, but I wasn't sure from where.

I began reciting a spell in my mouth as I looked around the chapel. The open windows. The pillars

standing in a row. The remains of the stained glass. The chandelier stained with soot. Lurking behind the

blackness of the altar…

"But… that was all I did… After that, everyone else did the rest. They gathered people. They hated. They

kil ed. All I had to do watch from here. …it was real y fun… Normal y it's difficult to do for holy men, but the high priests, or whatever you call them, had malice and hatred within their own

hearts. Without noticing it,

it expanded on its own. And I watched as the city was tainted with anxiety. Day by day, the hatred, the

animosity, steadily, steadily…”

You irritating…!

“Elmekia Lance!” I released my spel . I was aiming for the only stained glass that was stil intact. Just

before the spell hit, the stained glass– no, the thing that took the form of it, melted dow, avoided the attack and sunk down to the floor.

“Ohhh… you knew where I was…”

Naturally. The lead frame of the stained glass is weakened by heat. While all of the others had been

burned away, this one was the only one stil intact, which was extremely unnatural. But I didn’t need to

explain that. With a small quiver, he took form. His color– it was like he was blotted with all the various

colors of the stained glass. He was about two heads taller than Gourry and temporarily taking a human

shape, but on his face there were no eyes, ears, a mouth, or a nose. Instead, multiple eyes and mouths

opened all over his body. Just as expected. Mazoku.

“Surely… it’s just as you say…” I said. “Everything was done

by humans. Releasing the darkness they

held within their hearts… Since you seem like a pretty low ranking Mazoku, I guess the best you can do is

a cheap shot like burning someone to death while they're asleep.

"A human…! Making fun of the great Zenui…?!" Wrath swel ed up in the Mazoku's voice. Without worrying

about it, I held my right hand out at Gourry.

"Gourry… let me borrow your sword for a second. I'l be enough for this guy."

"Don't be reckless." Gourry said as he drew his sword and handed it over to me.

"I know." I said as I took it.

"Don't make light of me!" Zenui roared as he came toward me. Readying the sword, I began reciting my

spell.

"Gah!" Zenui spat a firebal from the mouth on the right side of his chest. But I avoided it by jumping to the side.

Far away, there was the color of bursting flames. Zenui came toward me. Just before he entered sword

range, his neck stretched out, looking down on me. *I get it.*

Staying extremely calm I knocked the sword into his feet. Stretching out its neck was just a feint. His feet

transformed, the innumerable eyes and mouths stretching towards me. One swing of the Blast Sword cut

them away entirely.

“Gyaaugh?!” with an unbecoming scream, Zenui jumped far back.

“Blast Ash!” My spel produced the darkness that appeared behind him.

“Gah!?” The Mazoku’s back was swal owed in darkness. In a panic, he jumped back again. He continued

to jump back until he was clinging to the ceiling of the chapel. “Y-You think your sword can reach me

now?!” He cried in a triumphant voice. Without paying him any attention, I cast a spell.

Darkness beyond twilight, crimson beyond blood that flows

Buried in the flow of time, in thy great name…

“Die!” transforming into an undecided shape as it crept up to the ceiling, Zenui spat fire from its mouth.

But…

Brandishing the blast sword in my hands, the flames that came toward me were split in two, the fragments

of which wouldn’t reach me, because of the preventive barrier caused by my incantation.

“What?!” Zenui cried out in shock. No matter how many times

he shot flames at me, they would meet the

same fate as that first attack. And so…

Let the fools who stand before me be destroyed

By the power you and I possess…

I released my completed spell at the ceiling.

“Dragon Slave!”

The red light converged on Zenui as he clung to the ceiling.

“G–!” With only that for a scream, it disappeared.

A giant light pierced the heavens. The attack made a direct hit with the Mazoku and blew the top of the

temple clear off. The area around the main temple itself was a pretty wide plot of land. Excluding here,

where the explosion was, there probably won’t be much damage.

That was… For the Mazoku that spread the seeds of hate through the city, it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t

nearly enough for the one that was left at the end. That wasn’t enough but… For me, it was excessively

frustrating. This… Because of this weakling Mazoku… I turned my back to Gourry. Silently, I wiped my

cheek. If I looked up, through the roof, which had been completely blown away, there I could see the sky

and the clouds floating above. Before I knew it, the sky was dyed madder red.

***

North Sellentia City.

We were in a place practically on the outskirts of town, on a

slight hill with a nice view. In the gentle light of the sun, the well maintained lawn glistened radiantly. There were no people left around, only white

gravestones in rows. The Sel entia City Public Cemetary. In one corner, a girl's name was etched into a

small white tombstone. Gourry and I stood before it with flowers in our hands. There were many flowers

offered at the grave, the old mixed in with the new. It was obvious who left them. I wondered where he

was now. No one knew. Since then, he had disappeared.

"It's al over…" I said as I crouched down in front of the gravestone, offering the flowers from my hands.

"We got rid of the bastard who sowed the seed of hatred in this city…"

The wind blew. On the green hill.

"–Hey, Lina?" Gourry asked as if he had just remembered something. "Yesterday, the Mazoku you beat at

the temple… It's a good thing he came out when you provoked him but… what were you gonna do if he

didn't show up?"

"He was going to show up. Absolutely. Wel , it was kind of a gamble guessing where in the temple he was

though."

But if there had been a Mazoku in the temple, it would have shown up without fail. That's what I believe.

Because, more than provoking him, what I said back then was like a forced summoning spell for a

Mazoku. Since Mazoku can't chal enge humans to battle on the Astral Plane, a human can't be

considered a serious opponent. Or so I heard from an acquaintance. Facing a human seriously is no

different from admitting that they're not even strong enough to take on a human without putting effort into

it. For an astral being like a Mazoku, that could weaken it to the point of being fatal. This time I put that to use. *If you don't show yourself, aren't you just admitting that you aren't powerful enough to fight a human?*

Having a rough idea that our opponent was Mazoku, I said that to the one that was hiding there

somewhere. If he heard that and his only reason for hiding was that he just didn't want to come out, then

he would have to acknoledge that he wasn't as powerful as a human, weakening him– and in some

cases, causing termination. In other words, when he heard me, he had to reveal himself.

"…Is that how it is?"

"That's how it is."

Gourry questioned me with a face as if he real y didn't know what was going on, and I answered without

explaining the details.

"So what's gonna happen with the city's head priest? I real y thought Kereth would be fine…"

"Wel , he said he didn't want to do it and they can't real y force him… They'l probably pul a suitable

person from some other town to fill the position. That would be appropriate. *Anyway.* That's a story we are no longer involved in."

"Wel , I guess that's true…" Gourry mumbled.

And then, a brief silence fell upon us and the wind blew.

"Wel … we should be going…" I said as I stood up, facing the gravestone.

"Where are we going?" Gourry asked.

"Anywhere's fine. We can think about it later. For now let's just get out of this city."

"I guess so…"

And so the two of us turned and walked away. Casually, I started thinking.

He disappeared. Had his heart been saved?

The answer– we didn't know. I shook my head a little without saying anything. The wind rustled the green

hill as we left.

Book 14 Afterword

[this translation follows the Afterword for the 2008 reprint of the novels.]

K: I hate everything about it! For that reason, it's the new edition of Hatred in Sel entia!

L: This became a relatively big turning point in the story, didn't it? While writing the second part, you were really terrible to the fans. You told them you were leaving Zelgadis and Amelia out, but the whole time this

was the reason for it.

K: That's how it is. Because of the recovery systems in stories and games, it was difficult to handle.

L: Certainly sometimes in Dragon *** a character gets killed by a villain and you think 'was it wrong to ***

here?!'

K: Right, right. In certain fantasy series, friends who have fought together, will die in a sudden event. Until just now in *** you were thinking 'how many times are they going to revive?!'

L: After that it's kind of a production problem. They could dance through the fire of a sub-machine gun, get

hit by an explosion from a giant snake, be bitten in the neck by a wolf, but then die by getting stabbed by a

little girl trotting back to them with a sword.

K: Ah… That. But if it happens at the end, it's a surprise and you think 'What?! That's how they real y die?!

L: This isn't your favorite game. What about during production and composition, even in this story? For

example, if you left Amelia out, it'd probably fol ow the same storyline, but you'd have to explain extra

things and make rearrangements and it would make it seem slower. In the end, you can't leave her out.

K: Right. But this time around when I was proofreading for the new edition, I didn't feel as swept up in my

emotions as I did when I was writing it. Yeah, sometimes I think it's weird that I lose my composure like

this.

L: If that's how you feel, why don't you just rewrite it?

K: There was a time when I wanted to do that for myself. When it was first decided that there was going to

be a reprint, the editor said even though it had all been proofread, he would pardon a major revision.

Proofreading it, I finally understood the reason behind sacrificial animals. When I wanted to rewrite it, I

was doing it at a mad pace. It was fine to just do it self-indulgently, but when I got to actually rewrite it, tampering with it would change the way the story unfolded. It would lose its balance and I would overwork

it until it lost its shape. On top of that, revising it was making my confidence go around in circles!

L: Be proooouuuud! Throw away that kind of confidence! But if you did just plunge in and change things

without caring it wouldn't be good for the story. What if back at volume eight, I took control of the main

character and then just did whatever I wanted? I would travel across the kingdoms meeting with Mazoku

and then 15 minutes before the show ends, I'd say 'don't watch this madness!' and fil the area with

nothingness.

K: You're fol owing the route of Mito Koumon*?! If that happened there wouldn't be any good or bad

people left!

L: There wouldn't be any people, so there wouldn't be any trouble. In other words, true peace!

K: That's wrong! There isn't a single person who actual y thinks that would be peace. That would just be

nothing!

L: Huh? But wouldn't it al be in vain if you punished an evil magistrate and then some years later another

evil magistrate took his place?

K: …wel , I think that's true but… But you're saying you want

everyone to disappear. Are supposed to be

some kind of final boss?

L: . . . . . no . . . . I think I could be compared to one but…

K: Hah! You forgot but as soon as I mentioned it–!

L: Forgot…? Oho~ You are vastly underestimating me. I *fully* remember. It just happened to come up in

conversation.

K: (Guarding himself) Wh-What? You aren't thinking about attacking me, are you…?

L: Hey, since this is the afterword, can't I occasional y obliterate the author?

K: It bothers me that you're actual y asking permission… wel , fine.

L: But you'l have revived by the next afterword, as if nothing ever happened. It's just like main characters

in games who revive infinitely.

K: Yeah, but without any memories that the Kings or priests would find fault with. Why is it like that the

next time they revive…? Don't things like that happen in their world?

L: I've had enough of your abstract popular opinions! …er, wel , that might be true but… Wel , anyway.

This was the afterword.

K: What's with that spear?! …uh, well then everyone, until next time.

*Mito Koumon was a popular TV drama.